

COMBATING THE THREAT OF FEMALE ATHLETES:  
AFFIRMATIONS OF FEMININITY AND HETEROSEXUALITY IN  
WOMEN'S PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

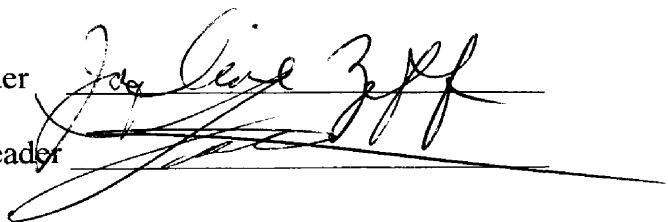
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First Reader

Second Reader

The image shows two handwritten signatures. The first signature, for the First Reader, is written in cursive and appears to read 'John C. ...'. The second signature, for the Second Reader, is also in cursive and is more stylized, possibly reading 'John C. ...'. Both signatures are written over horizontal lines.

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## Introduction: The Odd Trend in Female Professional Athletics

On May 29, 2005, twenty-three year old Danica Patrick made history when she placed fourth at the Indianapolis 500, the highest placement ever for a female driver in the track's almost 100 year history. In fact, her participation in the race caused such a commotion that that year's Indy 500 winner, Dan Wheldon, has been lost in her shadow. Though some claim this as one more leap forward towards an equal playing field, quite literally, for female athletes, feminists may not be celebrating yet. Danica Patrick's participation in that year's Indy 500 was not her first major media exposure. In actuality, Patrick became popular two years earlier, when she posed for a men's magazine called *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*). Patrick donned red leather boots and various bikinis as she posed provocatively upon the hood of a dolled-up racecar (See Fig. 1-3). During her interview with the *FHM* reporter, she was asked such questions as, "Are there times of the month when you are a more aggressive or angry driver?" to which she responded, "Not that I've noticed" ("Formula"). One has to wonder whether Patrick would have received so much media attention prior to the Indy 500 race had she not posed in these photos and cashed in on her "model looks," as *People* magazine described her appearance (Silverman). Indeed, she was certainly not the first woman to race in the Indy 500 – Janet Guthrie, Lyn St. James, and Sarah Fisher all went around the track before her – but she seemed to be the most well-known.

Patrick is not the only one who has used her appearance to further her career in a male-dominated sports world. Anna Kournikova is perhaps one of the most recognizable figures in women's tennis, yet she has never won a single championship. She has

millions of dollars worth of endorsements without a single title to her name. Instead, she and her promoters seized the opportunity to utilize her appearance, rather than her talent, to guarantee her success in the sporting world. Kournikova has posed nude for several magazine layouts, as well as appearing in the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue* in 2004 (See Fig. 4). Posing nude seems to be common among today's brightest female athletes, including Brandi Chastain, Jenny Thompson, Gabrielle Reece, Stacy Dragila, and Amy Acuff. One might wonder why this sudden surge of nudity among young female professional athletes? The answer may be more complicated than simply a little media promotion.

Why is it so common to see female athletes posing nude in magazine layouts, or discussing husbands, children, or future modeling careers, instead of their current profession of professional athletics? My thesis sought to examine the role societal expectations of femininity played in directing the lives and careers of female professional athletes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically from World War II to present day. How did society react to these athletes when their sports were first established as professional careers? How does society react now, in the year 2008? Have these women been forced to make concessions that would never be expected of male athletes in order to be successful in their chosen career, simply because they are women? Why are athletics so often associated with lesbianism, and what has this done to women's professional sports?

In order to tackle these issues, I divided my thesis into three chapters, with subheadings for each. The first chapter, titled "Common Fears Associated with Women in Sports," begins by exploring the root of many of the early concerns that shaped women's athletics. These concerns included fears about what sports would do to the

physical health of women, especially regarding their reproductive capabilities. Other concerns included the fear that playing sports would make women too masculine, and possibly even result in homosexuality. Because of these qualms, women began making concessions in order to be allowed to participate in athletics. They began employing a “feminine apologetic,” which sought to assure the American public that, even though they were athletes, they were still women first, athletes second. They strove to prove that they were still feminine, maternal, and heterosexual in order to alleviate society’s misgivings.

The next two chapters explore this apologetic as it was employed, willingly or unwillingly, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by some of the most successful or well-known athletes of the time. Chapter two, titled “Emphasizing the Femininity of the Female Athlete,” explores a variety of ways in which femininity can be assured. An athlete can become more feminine, and therefore less threatening, if she maintains a feminine appearance at all times, emphasizes her attractiveness to males through nudity, appears to be a sweet little girl, or continually emphasizes her interest in stereotypically feminine activities (sewing, cooking, etc.) to the general public. Those athletes who do not actively display their femininity either have it thrust upon them in the media or run the risk of being publicly vilified for their “mannishness.” Chapter three, “Emphasizing the Heterosexuality of the Female Athlete,” discusses the possible dangers of being a lesbian in the professional sports world and the lengths some athletes will go to in order to prove their heterosexuality. Those who do admit to being lesbians may risk their careers if they begin to lose fans or important endorsement deals.

While women's rights have certainly progressed since the 1930's, it is my belief that the world of women's professional sports is still fighting some age-old battles. In this country, we have always had a particular idea of what the ideal woman should be, though that image may have changed some over time. However, what has not changed is the fact that, in order to be truly successful in the world of professional sports – in terms of money, respect, and recognition – women have had to prove themselves in more areas than just their athletic skills. They have had to gain public acceptance by portraying themselves as the “ideal woman” of the time: feminine, maternal, and heterosexual. If they do not succeed in assuring the public of this, they will be guaranteed to face more hurdles than just those on the track.

## **Chapter 1: Common Fears Associated with Women in Sports**

### *Not Fit to Play: Historical Concerns about the Physical Health of Female Athletes*

Supporting female participation in organized athletics, especially in the professional sphere, has always been a hotly contested issue. Although women had been involved in some forms of recreational sport – especially on college campuses – early in the twentieth century, many members of the American public had not been completely comfortable with this. In the early 1900s, many medical experts expressed concerns about what would happen to women if they engaged in the kind of excessive exercise some sports demanded. One concern dealt with female sexual energy: experts could not agree whether physical activity would unleash a kind of sexual frenzy that would lead to the downfall of proper young women, or if it would create an outlet through which women could channel sexual cravings. Susan Cahn, an assistant professor of history at the State University of New York, writes: “Experts vehemently debated whether competition unleashed nonprocreative, erotic desires identified with male sexuality and unrespectable women, or, conversely, whether invigorating sport enhanced a woman’s feminine charm and sexual appeal, channeling sexual energy into wholesome activity” (Cahn, “Muscle Moll” 343). This concern for loose morals is apparent in the terminology used at that time to discuss women in sports. Female athletes were sometimes referred to as “Muscle Molls,” a term that implied sexual impropriety or nymphomania, as the word “moll” was another term for prostitute (Cahn, “Muscle Moll” 346).

In addition to the possibility of unleashing women's sexuality, many doctors warned that too much exercise could lead to infertility. In her book *The Frailty Myth*, Colette Dowling, a writer and lecturer who has published numerous books and articles detailing women's issues throughout history, explains how "A hundred years ago, women were pushed backward in a very particular way. Just as they were beginning to demand education and political and economic power, they were stripped of the power of their bodies." She goes on to describe what scholars now call "the frailty myth" – the systematic, pervasive attempt by medical and psychological experts to convince the general public of women's inherent weaknesses, and the health risks that threaten to make themselves known if women exert themselves too much, physically or mentally. The ultimate threat facing women who might chance to "overexert" themselves? The inability to bear children. Such a threat was certainly enough to convince generations of women not to reach their physical potential. In a 1928 issue of *The Times* of London, a doctor wrote that "Nature made woman to bear children and she cannot rid herself of the fat to the extent necessary for physical fitness demanded by feats of extreme endurance" (qtd. in Armstrong 88). There was even a fear among some medical experts that too much athletic activity damaged women's reproductive organs by causing them to harden or atrophy (Cahn, "Muscle Moll" 346). One health educator even published reports that too much exercise causes women's genital organs to decay (Taylor).

In addition to doctors, even religious leaders and educators were warning women of the risk of infertility. In fact, in 1937, the "semi-official" Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* declared that Roman Catholic women must renounce athletics, as too much exercise would render them barren ("Sportswomen" 32).



Playing sports during one's menstrual cycle was especially dangerous, according to many medical experts of the time. Specifically, in the sport of basketball, a popular sport for American girls in the early 1900s, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* warned women about the dangers of dislodging their uterus if they played basketball during their menstrual period: "The uterus is physiologically congested and temporarily abnormally heavy and hence, liable to displacement by the inexcusable strenuousness and roughness of this particular game [basketball]" (qtd. in Griffin 32). It should be noted that during this time, "girl's rules" for basketball prohibited such things as physical contact with another player, dribbling more than two times, or running the length of the court. Even with these rules, however, women were warned that their futures as mothers could be at risk.

For a number of reasons, threats of infertility and other medical risks were directed only at white women during this time. For one, black women's bodies were seen as able to handle more rigorous physical labor, while white women were seen as far more delicate and in need of protection. In addition, medical experts and some members of the white public were only concerned with protecting white women's ability to bear children. If white women participated in sports and became infertile, it would mean "the end of the white race" (Dowling 16). Another reason why white women were targeted more than black women was simply because "at that time blacks were even more thoroughly excluded from organized sport than were women" (Dowling 16). The book *Sport and the Color Line: Black Athletes and Race Relations in Twentieth-Century America*, describes some of the difficulties faced by African-American women in the sporting world. According to authors Patrick B. Miller, a history teacher at Northeastern Illinois

University in Chicago, and David K. Wiggins, a sport history teacher at George Mason University, “The white press gave minimal coverage to black sports and seldom printed photographs of African-American athletes. Black women found that sex discrimination, in the form of small athletic budgets, halfhearted backing from black school administrators, and the general absence of support from white-dominated sport organizations, further impeded their development” (Miller and Wiggins 216-217). Black women becoming heavily involved in sport was just not as much of a possibility, and therefore did not need to be prevented with threats of barrenness.

Even if their reproductive organs were not in danger of being damaged, many experts believed that a woman’s menstrual cycle made her weak and unstable, and certainly not fit for athletic participation in such a delicate state. Such warnings scared many women out of participating in sports. In 1879, Thomas Emmet, the author of a medical textbook titled *The Principles and Practice of Gynecology*, suggested that girls “spend the year before and two years after puberty at rest,” so that their bodies could adjust to “the new order of life.” He also suggested that girls spend each menstrual period in “the recumbent position” so that they would not overexert themselves physically and endanger their health (Emmet 21). Doctors believed that women got plenty of exercise from simply completing their household tasks, and advised them to do no more than that, lest they experience weakness, fatigue, or fainting spells. Exercise during one’s menstrual cycle, it was believed, increased such health risks, and could even lead to the deterioration of women’s internal organs, muscles, and bones. Colette Dowling points out that even educational institutions like Vassar attempted to protect girls from such medical dangers. She writes, “Vassar girls were ‘positively forbidden’ to

do anything physical during the first two days of their periods, including going up and down stairs. Parents, in fact, were warned against letting their girls attend schools more than two stories high, lest during their menstrual periods they destroy themselves getting to the third floor” (15). It is no surprise, then, with doctors, educators, and families telling young girls that their very lives would be at risk if they physically exerted themselves, that many females were scared away from sports as a whole. As Colette Dowling explains, “Eventually women themselves came to view menstruation as disabling, if not actually pathological” (17).

The fears the medical establishment created for women interested in physical activities were enough to keep many women from leading active lifestyles. Ironically, it was this pervasive inactivity that eventually proved the medical establishment correct in their assumptions about feminine abilities – as Victorian girls restricted their movements more and more, their bodies became weaker and weaker. Their immobility resulted in extreme fatigue, weakness, and injury when they finally did exert themselves. Although they were weak simply because their bodies were no longer used to physical strain, doctors saw this as proof of what they’d been saying all along – women *were* the “weaker sex.”

Eventually, it was this increase in the apparent weakness of women that led the medical community to encourage minimal physical activity to improve the health of women. Doctors became very worried at the unusual weakness of Victorian women, as it was negatively impacting society. After all, women still had to be strong enough to deliver and care for children, their primary role in society. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, co-authors of three books studying women and health care, explain in

*For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*, "...toward the end of the century, it seemed that sickness had been winning out over reproductivity. The birth rate for whites shrank by a half between 1800 and 1900, and the drop was the most precipitous among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants – the 'better' class of people" (Ehrenreich and English 134). It was a delicate balance between making sure women did not exercise regularly, but still just enough to fulfill their roles as mothers. Therefore, some physical educators and doctors began encouraging minimal athletic participation for women, meant primarily to increase their strength in preparation for childbirth.

In 1928, physical educators, the National Amateur Athletic Federation, and even Lou Henry Hoover, President Hoover's wife, became concerned with the idea of formerly "recreational" activities for women suddenly becoming competitive with the upcoming Olympic Games (Dowling 32). Permitting women to indulge in minimal physical activity for health reasons and allowing them to participate in a physically rigorous athletic competition with women around the world were two very different things. Although a handful of women had maneuvered their way into the Games in events like golf and swimming in years past, their participation was widely frowned upon and largely forbidden. In 1932, women's track and field was allowed as an event in the Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. Track and field was normally considered to be way too physical and immodest for females, so the decision was a controversial one. However, the old expectations of women's weaknesses resulted in a fabricated account of the event, as rumors circulated about the results of the women's 800-meter race. In *The Frailty Myth*, Colette Dowling recounts how the runners were described as "staggering from fatigue," "pale," and "exhausted" as they crossed the finish line. Some of the runners

were reported to have not even made it to the finish line, unable to travel the 900 yards required of them before collapsing. *The New York Times* published accounts of “The cinder track [being] strewn with wretched damsels in agonized distress,” and even the Notre Dame football coach, Knute Rockne, called the race “a pitiful spectacle” (Dowling 166). Because of the purported “results” of the event, women were not allowed to participate in the 800-meter races again until 1964 – thirty two years later. In reality, the race did not transpire as it was reported. Sport historian Lynne Emery insists that “all nine finalists had completed [the race]. Olympic officials had never had a good reason to eliminate the event” (Dowling 166). Expectations about how much physical activity was appropriate for women were so ingrained that even when women proved they could handle physically demanding events, people refused to believe it.

Women athletes continued to face obstacles when it came to participating in the Olympics. Women’s team sports were not introduced into the Olympics until 1964, when volleyball was finally recognized as an event, because team sports were traditionally considered too rough and too competitive for women. Other team sports, such as soccer and softball, were not allowed until 1996. Similar to the concerns about the 800-meter race in 1932, women “weren’t even allowed to enter the marathon until 1984 because their delicate bodies and menstrual cycles were thought to be unable to handle the stress” (Armstrong 88).

*Turning into Men: Concerns about the Potential for “Mannishness” in the Female Athlete*

In addition to concerns about female athletes experiencing uncontrollable sexual desire, infertility, and debilitating health issues, some experts also worried that female athletic participation would produce a kind of “mannishness,” whereby young girls would begin to take on more and more masculine characteristics with increased activity. In 1934, Fred Wittner, a writer for *The Literary Digest*, commented on the potential masculinizing effect sports might have on women in an article titled “Shall the Ladies Join Us?” In it, Wittner poses the question, “Will the playing fields of America one day be ruled by Amazons?” In response, Wittner comments upon the increase in size of American women from 1890 to 1934, and speculates that if women continue to involve themselves in athletic endeavors, “by the year 2000 we may have – perish the thought! – six foot, 175-pound women.” Indeed, as of the year 2008, Wittner’s worst fears have come true. In the sport of basketball, such statistics are now commonplace. Seven members of the U.S. women’s Olympic basketball team in the year 2000 were over six feet tall; only five were under six feet. Their weights ranged from 145 – 210 pounds. Likewise, exactly half of the prospects for the 2008 WNBA draft are over six feet tall. In addition to expressing his own concerns in his article, Fred Wittner quotes Dr. Frederick Rand Rogers, the dean of student health and physical education at Boston University. Dr. Rogers calls the Olympics “women’s greatest enemy, because it will cause her to lose her womanliness.” He goes on to argue that participation in sports creates a great danger for young girls. He states, “They develop ugly muscles – muscles ugly in girls – as well as showing scowling faces and the competitive spirit. As an inevitable consequence girls

trained in physical education today may find it more difficult to attract the most worthy fathers for their children” (Wittner 42).

Indeed, in a *Ladies' Home Journal* article of the same year titled “He Hasn’t A Chance: A Rather Complete Manual on the More or Less Subtle Art of Getting a Man,” Alice-Leone Moats warns that qualities such as vivacity, vitality, and good sportsmanship – qualities often associated with women athletes – are “the very qualities that are likely to make him consider anything but marriage” (12). According to Moats, self-sufficiency and confidence, common traits among many female athletes, “can seem an added attraction in a girl just so long as she doesn’t want to be taken seriously” (72). If she does want to be taken seriously as a potential mate, Moats explains, she must display traditionally feminine qualities. The message being conveyed to women in this article is that if they do not remain appropriately feminine, they will never find love. Certainly, in 1934, participating in competitive sports was considered anything but feminine.

In 1929, Dr. Frederick Rand Rogers – who was then the director of health education for the state of New York – wrote an essay detailing the many problems he saw with allowing women to compete in the Olympics. He believed that the strength and skill required for events like track and field were “profoundly unnatural” for women. Because he held that the Olympics “are essentially masculine in nature and develop wholly masculine physiques and behavior traits,” Rogers warned that participation would destroy women’s “health, physical beauty, and social attractiveness.” Finally, he asserted that “Manly women... may constitute nature’s greatest failures, which should perhaps, be corrected by as drastic means as those by which the most hideous deformities are treated” (Rogers 194). Certainly, when the man in charge of making all health education

decisions for the state of New York believed that female athletes were “nature’s greatest failures” and even likened them to “hideous deformities,” the push to prevent women from entering into the sporting world could be strong. Women themselves learned that they were abnormal, if not even somehow damaged, if they enjoyed serious athletic competition, and so largely stayed away.

Again, even religious leaders expressed their concern with the potential masculinization of young girls in sports. Pope Pius XI expressed his concerns in a letter to the vicar of Rome that stated, “If ever women must raise a hand we hope and pray she may do so only in prayer or for acts of charity... Everything must be avoided which contrasts with reserve and modesty, which are the ornament and safeguard of virtue.” Without reserve or modesty, believed to be absent in the world of athletics, women risked developing undesirable masculine traits like “the inevitable qualities of rowdyism” (qtd. in Cahn, Coming 63).

If girls did play sports, steps were taken to ensure that they still remain as ladylike as possible with the enforcement of “girls’ rules.” Girls’ rules sought to prevent masculine behavior such as roughness, overly extreme competitiveness, excessive physical strain, and too much physical contact with other players. Susan Cahn refers to a woman named J. Anna Norris, a member of the Physical Education department at the University of Wisconsin in 1924, who advocated girls’ rules. Cahn summarizes Norris’ point regarding why girls’ rules are important in her book *Coming On Strong*:

“woman is not essentially a fighting animal,” [and] the “essential feature” of girls’ rules was to “discourage personal contact, interference and tussling.” In describing the attributes acquired should “tussling” be



permitted, Norris hinted that physical touch was in itself masculine. She asserted that allowing the female player more contact would foster “aggressive qualities which seldom add to her charm or usefulness.”

(Coming 99)

Indeed, some feminist historians believe that the entire purpose of separate rules for men and women within the same sport was to keep women a separate entity. Playing sports according to the same rules would mean that women were able to do the same things men could do, and would, in effect, mean that women no longer possessed those feminine qualities that set them apart.

All of the concerns about athletics resulting in a loss of femininity brought about *expectations* of sportswomen as being unnatural, ugly, and masculine. As Susan Cahn describes, “College yearbooks of the 1930s began to ridicule P.E. majors and WAA [Women’s Athletic Association] members, portraying them as hefty, disheveled, and ugly. One 1937 yearbook sarcastically titled its WAA section ‘Over in No Man’s Land’” (Coming 174). Another yearbook, in 1952, stated, “Believe it or not, members of the Women’s Athletic Association are normal... at least one... of WAA’s 300 members is engaged” (qtd. in Cahn, Coming 178). Although it seems to be attempting to disprove stereotypes, this University of Minnesota yearbook is actually perpetuating them by indicating that one out of three hundred female athletes being engaged is a surprising and pleasant statistic. Also, by beginning their report with “Believe it or not,” it is apparent that normality was considered rare in the world of sportswomen.

In addition to yearbooks, doctors and scientists also added to the belief that all female athletes must be ugly and unwanted. Women were warned of conditions such as

“bicycle face,” where too much time spent riding a bicycle and experiencing “excessive muscular tension and strain” would result in a freakishly deformed facial expression that would become permanently affixed. Female athletes were also constantly threatened with their heightened possibility of becoming spinsters, as no man would want to marry someone so unfeminine and unappealing. Doctors began referring to places like women’s colleges and feminist and athletic organizations as “spinster factories,” where unnatural female proximity and untraditional values would result in male rejection (qtd. in Griffin 32, 35). In a 1953 article on seven spinster sisters in *Life* magazine, *Life* reported that “the middle-aged unmarried Texas siblings went to bed at night prattling about their high school athletic feats” (“*Life*”). The implication here is that if women are involved in sports when they are young, they will remain alone forever.

An underlying, less obvious consequence of women becoming more and more masculine is the inevitable change in the whole idea of masculinity itself. Men’s participation in sports and other traditionally “masculine” activities is an essential part of the socialization process. If women were to be just as much a part of such activities, what would a man’s role be in society? Colette Dowling, a writer and lecturer who explores women’s issues in history, details what modern historians and sociologists refer to as “a crisis of masculinity” that started around the mid-1800’s and continued into the next century. During this time, urbanization and industrialization threatened to take men’s places as providers for their families as farmers and small-businessmen were increasingly put out of business, and the rising women’s movement “signal[ed] ‘the end for men’s monopoly of the ballot box, the college classroom, and the professional school.’ Nineteenth-century notions of male superiority were clearly in jeopardy” (23).

If women not only made their way into the traditionally male spheres of voting, education, and the workplace, but also onto the playing field, what then would be left for men? Would other typically masculine fields also one day be shared with women? What then would make men needed, important, or different? Therefore, keeping women in their traditionally feminine roles also helped to protect masculine ones. Dowling points out, “As one by one old bastions of differentiation – social, economic, intellectual – began to crumble, at least men had their physical strength to fall back on... If women were not prevented from developing themselves physically, men’s ‘masculinity’ would be compromised” (22-23).

*Which “Team” is She Playing For?: The Fear of Lesbianism in Female Sport*

However, perhaps the greatest fear of the dangers of female athletics made itself widely known starting in the 1950s. The only thing worse, some believed, than a woman who cannot attract a man because of her prevailing masculine qualities is a woman who does not *want* to attract a man – in other words, a lesbian. Many feared that along with developing traditionally masculine qualities such as aggression, sexual cravings, and large muscles, women would also develop a man’s tendency for a romantic interest in other women. Even if they weren’t already attracted to the same sex, being involved in women’s sports teams would expose them to other lesbians who would influence their decisions. As if participating in non-feminine activities like physical competition weren’t already enough to threaten the traditional gender roles established in society, an increase

in lesbianism would certainly overthrow the stereotyped female domestic and maternal roles.

Again, doctors and scientists became involved with proving a correlation between athleticism and lesbianism. Susan Cahn describes one example of an “expert’s” concern over homosexual behaviors developing as a result of involvement in sports:

At a 1956 conference for directors of college women’s physical education, guest speaker Dr. Josephine Renshaw warned educators about the danger of same-sex attachments among college female athletes. Her talk, “Activities for Mature Living,” advised the audience to do all in their power to encourage heterosexual interest in women athletes because the “muscular Amazon with unkempt hair, clod-hopper shoes, and dowdy clothing” might “revert to friendships with [her] own sex if disappointed in heterosexual attachments.” (Coming 164)

According to Dr. Renshaw, all it might take for a girl to buck traditional social relationships is a couple of bad dates with males and frequent exposure to other women. Of course, these girls were already at risk as they had already embraced other non-feminine attributes, like having muscles, messy hair, clunky shoes, and unattractive clothing. But the message is clear: in such a setting, women can be easily influenced to engage in “unacceptable behavior.”

Dr. Renshaw was not the only doctor who attempted to describe the relationship between an interest in sports and a tendency for homosexual behavior. Havelock Ellis, a sexologist, described how “There is often some capacity for athletics” in lesbians (qtd. in Cahn, Coming 166). A psychology student, E. Lowell Kelly, tested the masculinity and

femininity of certain subjects using a scale that he created, and he found that “his test group of eighteen lesbians scored slightly less masculine than a group of thirty-seven superior women college athletes” (Cahn, *Coming* 226). These results were startling, as they indicated that even lesbians were more feminine than women who were athletes. Many people believed that there was nothing more unfeminine than a woman who didn’t like men, but this test seemed to affirm that sportswomen were the worst of all. Plus, the fact that Kelly linked these two subject pools in order to draw a comparison only strengthened the connection people saw between athleticism and lesbianism. They were intertwined, or at least related.

*“Playing the Game”: Employing the Feminine Apologetic to Allay Society’s Fears*

Even though the medical concerns about females in athletics have been widely discredited, the potential for a loss of femininity and an increase in lesbianism still remain a source of anxiety for the general public. As Susan Cahn puts it, “The figure of the mannish lesbian athlete has acted as a powerful but unarticulated ‘bogey woman’ of sport” (Cahn, “Muscle Moll”). In response to all of these fears – sexual aggressiveness, loss of femininity and the threat of lesbianism – the sport media and female athletes themselves have employed what some call a “feminine apologetic,” whereby female athletes feel compelled to overcome the “image problem” by representing themselves as hyper-feminine, hyper-heterosexual beings in order to allay society’s misgivings regarding female athleticism (Guiliano 272). According to Patricia Clasen:

The apologetic suggests that the woman athlete: can appear feminine, which is why so many descriptions of women's sports include reference to the attractiveness and physical attributes of the athletes; is feminine, which has to do with sexual normalcy and attractiveness as well as so called "lady-like" behavior; and wants to be feminine, which means that social roles are valued more than sport roles, and life goals include marriage and motherhood rather than being a champion athlete. (Clasen 36)

Women athletes need to compensate for the traditionally "masculine" behaviors they display on the field – sweating, building strength, showing their competitiveness – by proving to the public that, off the field, they are just as ladylike and interested in the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood as any other woman. The more she can prove her "normalcy," the more accepted she typically is in the world of professional sports. The less she attempts to adhere to traditional feminine standards, the more she risks suffering the disapproval of the American public.

If the athletes themselves do not present the image the American public wants to see, the sport media – magazine, television, and newspaper reporters alike – will either present it *for* them, or vilify them for their unladylike behavior. Often, the ways athletes are pictured or described in the media portray images of the ideal American woman – feminine, sexy, heterosexual, and sometimes even maternal. Instead of being photographed on the playing field, women may be photographed at home, in their kitchens, with their husbands and children nearby. Sometimes athletes are encouraged to pose in provocative postures, positions that have little or nothing to do with their sport, in order to portray them as attractive, heterosexual beings. In addition to photographs,

athletes may be described by the sports media in ways that reinforce their femininity and innocence, to temper the potential threat they pose to tradition. If athletes refuse to participate in such apologetic behavior, the media will often attack them in subtle, or even sometimes not so subtle, ways.

Appeasing the public's expectations of femininity becomes even more important now that an athlete's success can often be partially measured by the number of product endorsement deals they can acquire. Endorsements are only offered to the most popular and well-loved of athletes, and women do not typically gain popularity by bucking traditional schools of thought. Male athletes usually gain endorsements based more on skill than anything else. The public can still appreciate and support a male athlete who is unattractive, as long as he is good at what he does; on the flipside, if a male athlete is not very talented in his sport but is good-looking, his appearance alone will not get him far at all. For males, it is usually the best athletes who receive the biggest offers, whether or not they are the most attractive athletes. For women, the process becomes much trickier. For women, "Marketing is about image, not performance...It's no coincidence that as marketing gets more and more important, women's outfits get smaller and smaller" (qtd. in Nebenzahl F4). Ty Votaw, the LPGA commissioner, even stated in 2002 that "athletic performance alone is not enough to build ties between players and fans" (Isidore). This is not something one would hear about male athletes. For men, athletic performance is often the single driving force in determining if they will have loyal fans. Their appearance and their personal lives are secondary to their skill level. Mike Tyson, Kobe Bryant, Darryl Strawberry, and many others like them still retained loyal fan bases and large paychecks regardless of their personal downfalls and inappropriate behaviors.

However, in order for fans to truly respect and support a female athlete, she has to do more than just prove her athletic skill; she also has to prove that she is the ideal woman. Women do not necessarily have to be the best athletes in order to be the most successful ones in terms of fame and wealth; conversely, just because they might be the best athletes does not mean that they will be at all successful. For example, Anna Kournikova, one of the most highly publicized female tennis players in history, received \$16 million in endorsements in the year 2002, and tournament organizers regularly paid her extra to appear at their events. She was pictured regularly in all types of magazines and newspapers ever since she first appeared on the sporting scene. Was it her skill that made her so successful? Many people in the American public knew she was not the most skilled tennis player. In fact, she was only ranked 55<sup>th</sup> in the world and had not won a single women's singles title, even though she competed for one over one hundred times (Bagnall B3). Instead, Kournikova's success was simply a result of her beauty, her femininity, and her overall willingness to employ a feminine apologetic to her sport. She was popular because no one ever questioned her feminine appearance, her heterosexuality, or her more traditional interests outside the world of tennis. According to Mariah Burton Nelson, former professional basketball player and author of numerous books about women in sports, this is common among successful female athletes. In her article, "I Won. I'm Sorry," she explains:

Most female winners play the femininity game to some extent, using femininity as a defense, a shield against accusations such as bitch, man-hater, lesbian. Feminine behavior and attire mitigate against the affront of female victory, soften the hard edges of winning. Women who want to



win without losing male approval temper their victories with beauty, with softness, with smallness, with smiles. (Nelson)

Women, like Anna Kournikova, need to play the femininity game just as well as they play their sport (sometimes even better), or they will never be fully accepted in the professional sports world.

Even today, thirty years after the women's movement of the 1970s, female athletes and the sport media still employ this feminine apologetic, often without realizing it. From Babe Didrikson to Anna Kournikova, women in the sports world have needed to emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality, explicitly or implicitly, in order to placate common fears and reduce the threat upon traditional masculine roles.

## **Chapter 2: Emphasizing the Femininity of the Female Professional Athlete**

### *Playing Like a Girl: Maintaining a Feminine Appearance in Women's Professional Sports*

During a young girl's soccer game in Lewisville, Texas, in 1990, even a nine year old goalie discovered the tricky balance a female athlete must strike between playing the sport she loves and continuing to convince others that she is still a real female. The goalie, Natasha Dennis, found herself the center of controversy when, in the middle of her game, two angry fathers of girls on the opposing team stormed onto the field, demanding that her sex be verified. Two other girls on Natasha's team were also fingered as being too good at the sport to be female. The fathers insisted that all three girls be taken into a bathroom and inspected before the game could continue. The fathers were eventually subdued by the crowd, but made their anger known with their comments to Natasha Dennis. They "complimented" the young goalie at the end of the game with remarks like "Nice game, boy!" and "Good game, son" (Libman E1).

Women, and even nine year old girls, seem unable to escape the insinuation that if they are successful in sports or enjoy competition, they are somehow less than female. Comments like those Natasha Dennis experienced are all too common among female athletes. In order to be accepted in such a traditionally masculine sphere as competitive sports, women must continuously lessen the threat they pose by convincing anyone who will listen that they are indeed still women. The public's fears and concerns must be consistently and subtly assuaged in order for a female athlete to be accepted. In order to convince the public of her womanhood, an athlete must display as much femininity as

possible. There are several common methods by which the femininity of a female athlete is highlighted in the media. Perhaps the most obvious is simply the struggle to convey a feminine, ladylike appearance at all times, even during intense competition.

Throughout the history of the United States, it has been very difficult to create successful, lucrative women's professional athletic organizations. Colette Dowling, author of *The Frailty Myth*, points out one reason why women playing professional sports do not receive much support. She notes that "Historically, strength has been encouraged in women only when the economy needs it – during wars, while the men are away, or when helping to pioneer new lands" (6). In the early 1940's, World War II created such a need. The economy finally needed not only female workers in the factories, but it also needed female athletes. When the shortage of male players and audience members during World War II threatened to close his baseball stadium, Philip Wrigley set out to create the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). Wrigley needed players to keep his stadium open, and the American public needed a pleasant distraction from the realities of war. However, in order to sell his idea, Wrigley knew that he had to make the idea of women playing baseball professionally less threatening to the public. He had to make sure that the women's talent for baseball was balanced with overtly feminine appearances and demeanors. If the women looked or acted too much like masculine ballplayers, Wrigley figured, then no one would buy into the idea, so to speak. On the other hand, if they were presented as a kind of novelty act – gorgeous, feminine women doing their patriotic duty in helping the war effort – then men and women alike would flock to watch them play. Therefore, "league officials announced that AAGPBL policy prohibited the recruitment of 'freaks' and 'Amazons'" (Cahn,

Coming 350). As Philip Wrigley stated, “Femininity is the keynote of our league... No pants-wearing, tough-talking female softball player will play on any of our four teams” (Ward and Burns 280). During tryouts, some women were disappointed to find that their athletic ability came second to their appearance. If they were not attractive enough or feminine enough, they were not accepted into the league. Likewise, if players did not maintain a feminine appearance once they were a part of the league, they could be fined or fired, as outlined in the “League Rules of Conduct.” Josephine D’Angelo, a player for the South Bend Blue Sox during the first two years of the league, was fired for cutting her hair into a short bob because the style did not reflect the mission of the league. Later, attempts to feminize and “normalize” the league’s athletes continued with careful publicity, such as the publishing of the number of married players in the league along with other, more pertinent, statistics.

In order to reduce the masculine effects of playing baseball even further, the women were first given uniforms very different from those of the men’s teams. Most significantly, their uniforms consisted of a dainty skirt instead of pants, which continued to grow shorter and shorter every year (See Fig. 5). Such a skirt was not conducive to sliding into home base, and the women often nursed giant “strawberries”: large, bloody bruises on their upper thighs or buttocks.

The women were also given strict rules about maintaining their appearances, both on and off the field. Shirley Jameson, an outfielder for Kenosha, recalled her team’s chaperone always attempting to uphold the strict policies of the league, even if they were in the middle of a game. Jameson said, “As I went to the plate in a tight situation – a game-winning situation – [she said] ‘Oh, my dear, you don’t have on your lipstick’”

(Berler 52). In fact, the official “League Rules of Conduct” that each woman was supposed to follow lists several guidelines regarding appearance, including the requirement for lipstick at all times. The very first rule states: “ALWAYS appear in feminine attire when not actively engaged in practice or playing ball. This regulation continues through the playoffs for all, even though your team is not participating. AT NO TIME MAY A PLAYER APPEAR IN THE STANDS IN HER UNIFORM, OR WEAR SLACKS OR SHORTS IN PUBLIC” (“League Rules”). In order to assure the fans that the players were women first, athletes second, they were forbidden to wear pants in public at any time. After all, pants were a masculine item of clothing, and any apparent masculine behaviors or appearances were avoided at all costs.

In addition to the consistent donning of lipstick and skirts, players in the AAGPBL were also forbidden to cut their hair too short in an effort to emphasize femininity. Like what happened in Josephine D’Angelo’s case, a player could be fired for cutting her hair too short, a violation of rule number two on the “League Rules of Conduct.” Rule number two reads “Boyish bobs are not permissible and in general your hair should be well groomed at all times with longer hair preferable to short hair cuts” (“League Rules”). The league handbook attempted to rationalize such rules in the section titled “Femininity with Skill.” This section proposed that it was “more dramatic to see a feminine-type girl throw, run, and bat than to see a man or boy or masculine-type girl do the same things. *The more feminine the appearance of the performer, the more dramatic the performance*” (qtd. in Cahn, Coming 150). In other words, the more femininity a player displayed along with her talent, the more impressive and successful she was as a female athlete. This continues to be a theme in modern-day athletics, as more attention

and respect seems to be given to those women who can balance both the power of athleticism and the reassurance of continued femininity while on the playing field.

However, for Wrigley, making sure his players came across as ladylike in appearance was only half the battle: he also wanted them to act like ladies. That is why, in addition to the Rules of Conduct, he sent each of his players to a mandatory series of lessons at Helena Rubinstein's charm school. There, they learned how to properly apply makeup, how to put on a coat, and how to step in and out of a car gracefully (Berler 53). The charm school guidebook each woman received offered advice such as how to "apply a lotion to keep your hands as lovely as possible," and instructions on how to perform "a simple little exercise for the eyes which... will add to their sparkle and allure." This exercise involved looking first at the ceiling, then at the floor, then to the right, and to the left, and this procedure was to be repeated several times. The guidebook also gave advice on caring for one's mouth, face, teeth, and hair, which was described as "One of the most noticeable attributes of a girl... woman's crowning glory." Even though these women were recruited to play a hard-nosed game of baseball, extreme care was taken to guarantee bare legs, reddened lips, long hair, soft hands, and sparkling eyes. As the charm school guide affirms, "People want to be able to respect their heroines at all times... We ask you to follow the rules of behavior for your own good as well as that of the future success of girls' baseball" ("All-American"). Clearly, the guide insinuates that one does not garner the public's respect through her athletic ability, but through appropriately feminine behaviors.

Later, as the league's popularity began to wane, the main office of the AAGPBL sent a memo that reminded its members, "This league has only two things to sell to the

public, baseball and femininity” (qtd. in Cahn, Coming 151). Indeed, women’s baseball did survive for eleven years, longer than almost everyone expected it to last. Most likely, women’s baseball was received more warmly as a result of non-threatening, entirely feminine, participants. If there had instead been a field full of Wittner’s “Amazons,” women’s baseball may never have made it past first base.

This tradition of emphasizing the femininity of women athletes did not end with the dissolution of the AAGPBL. The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) continues to encourage its members to present an ultra-feminine appearance even today. In July of 2002, the LPGA’s commissioner, Ty Votaw, organized a conference in which he outlined his “Five Points of Celebrity” five-year plan, aimed at making players more appealing to the public. One of the points attempted to attract more fans to the sport by focusing on the women’s appearances. To kick-start his business plan, Votaw asked LPGA players to attend a conference that was designed to train them in fashion and beauty techniques. About sixty LPGA members gathered at the conference for “tips such as how to make their hair appear more ‘touchable’” from fashion designers like Vera Wang, hair stylists, and makeup artists (Isidore). Players were also instructed to avoid belts, as they do not look flattering on TV; to wear flat, untucked shirts; and to only wash their hair every other day to maintain its health (Hanson). Some players embraced the idea of Votaw’s conference, figuring that they must do whatever it takes to promote their sport in the public eye. Laura Diaz, a member of the LPGA who ranked eighth in prize money in 2001, fully supported Votaw’s plan to emphasize the beauty of LPGA players in order to increase its fan base. Since she joined the tour in 1999, Diaz has encouraged the LPGA to “promote our sex appeal.” In an article she wrote for *Sports Illustrated* in

2001, Diaz explained, “We have quite a few attractive women, and we should use our looks to our advantage. After all, what’s so wrong with seeing an occasional bellybutton?” (Diaz). After Votaw’s 2002 conference, Diaz was interviewed on the *Today* show, where she amended her previous comments: “There is a big difference between *sex* and *sex appeal*. What we are trying to do is be more appealing; the word *sex* shouldn’t be used” (Hanson). Diaz and other LPGA players defended the “makeover” tactics of their organization as an essential part of their public promotion. Many female athletes believe that beauty and athletic success are naturally related.

Such “makeovers” are common in the world of women’s professional sports. Every year, the Women’s Sports Foundation sponsors a dinner that is intended to be a fundraiser for women’s athletic events. At this event, female athletes have the chance to have experts give them a style makeover, with makeup tips and hair-styling. Such activities are not also offered to men attending the event (Griffin 72). One might assume that the rationale for such an exclusive opportunity is that, also present at the event, there are numerous potential male sponsors and contributors who may be more inclined to offer financial benefits to athletes who meet the traditional expectations of femininity.

Makeovers also happen outside the realm of sponsors. In a 1996 airing of the *Oprah Winfrey* show, Oprah invited the members of the Olympic softball team onto the show. However, instead of simply inviting them onto her panel to discuss their athletic endeavors, the show’s producers arranged for elaborate makeovers to be given to each woman before she even stepped out onto the stage. Each woman came onstage in a new hairdo, a dress and high heels, and fairly heavy makeup, and each was met with thunderous applause when the audience was shown a split screen picture of her former



“on-field” appearance (Griffin 73). Female athletes, when offered such “opportunities” for professional makeovers, are consistently encouraged to make their appearance their number one priority, and offers from sponsors or wild audience applause simply reinforces the importance and the benefits of such efforts.

Some female athletes even take it upon themselves to maintain a feminine appearance, without a dictum from a higher power. In the 1984 Olympics, runner Florence “Flo-Jo”Griffith-Joyner, while incredibly talented, was known largely for her long fingernails, her heavy jewelry, and her fashion sense. Griffith-Joyner set several fashion trends, such as shimmering bodysuits and hooded running uniforms. Venus and Serena Williams, two of the top tennis players of today, are also widely discussed for their choice of outfit and hairstyle on the day of a big match. The media often seems to appreciate these feminine appearances more than the athletes’ accomplishments on the field when they make a point of emphasizing it. The *Toronto Star* once published an article about Manon Rheaume, a hockey goalie famous for being the first woman to sign a professional hockey contract, that asserted “It does help that Rheaume is a comely nubile with hazel eyes, a glowing complexion, and a decidedly feminine grace. There is no hint of testosterone in her nature.” Likewise, *Sports Illustrated* described former figure skating champion Katarina Witt as “so fresh-faced, so blue-eyed, so ruby-lipped, so 12-car pileup gorgeous, 5 feet 5 inches and 114 pounds worth of peacekeeping missile” (qtd. in “Media”). Instead of concentrating on the amazing athletic abilities that got these women where they were, such reporters reduced them to nothing more than beautiful, ultra-feminine women. When the network *USA* was airing the U.S. Open in 2005, they, perhaps, summed up the apparent mission for women in athletics best with

their advertisement that ended with the message “Play hard... Drive hard... Leave a good-looking miniskirt.” It is okay to play your sport hard and win, as long as you leave the public with a final image of femininity.

Just as the AAGPBL emphasized the importance of its players appearing as feminine as possible while off the field, this expectation of female athletes continues today. In 2003, the WNBA created a promotional ad campaign called “This is Who I Am.” The intention of the campaign was to show the public what the WNBA players were “really like” off the court. It was the organization’s hope that such a campaign would dispel comments such as those of columnist Marianne Moody Jennings, who described the WNBA as having a “Janet Reno look” (qtd. in Solomon). Many of the pictures featured portrayed some of the WNBA’s toughest players as ultra-feminine, sexy women. Lisa Leslie, one of the stars of the Los Angeles Sparks, poses strangely in a spread-legged position, donning a short gold dress, diamond jewelry, and stiletto pumps (See Fig. 6). This certainly wasn’t the first time Leslie was portrayed as a woman who likes to dress up off the court. In an interview seven years earlier, Leslie was quoted as saying, “When I’m playing, I’ll sweat and talk trash. However, off the court, I’m lipstick, heels, and short skirts. I’m very feminine, mild-mannered, and sensitive” (Huntington 50). Also part of the WNBA’s “This is Who I Am” campaign was Ticha Penicheiro of the Sacramento Monarchs, who portrays a sexier version of femininity as she poses, heavily made-up, next to a bright yellow Dodge Prowler in an outfit entirely composed of tight black leather (See Fig. 7). Perhaps the most ridiculous photo proving the feminine nature of the WNBA players is that of Lisa Harrison, a forward for the Phoenix Mercury. Harrison looks as if she is a southern belle on the porch of a plantation

as she perches on a wooden railing in a white satin gown, twirling a white lace umbrella over her shoulder. Her hair is swept up in an elaborate hairdo and her arms are gloved in white satin up past her elbows (See Fig. 8). One cannot get much farther away from the sweaty, tennis shoe-wearing sport that put her in the spotlight – this WNBA ad campaign is simply meant to keep her there.

Other athletes, or their sponsors, have made special efforts to hide what they believed were masculine features that detracted from their perceived femininity. When she first arrived in the United States, Martina Navratilova was so embarrassed by her powerful build that she attempted to cover herself up with baggy clothes (See Fig. 9). She said, “I was always covering up my arms because I have these big veins and I didn’t want anyone to see my shoulders” (Donnelly 68). Indeed, Navratilova had reason to be concerned about her appearance, as she was characterized with terms such as “bionic sci-fi creature” and “monstrous Amazon” (Clasen 36). Unlike her rival Chris Evert, who was so ladylike that she “[did] not seem to sweat, much less disturb a strand of her honey brown hair,” Navratilova was not as popular with the public or the press because her appearance did not reassure the public of her femininity. Navratilova, the “monstrous Amazon,” had to try to compete with players like Evert in more than just tennis matches. She had to compete with the woman another player described as “[never looking] disheveled, or even pleasantly rumped” in the game of femininity as well (“Chris Evert”). Likewise, the sponsors of Catriona Le May Doan, a champion speed-skater, always try to picture her from the waist up so as to avoid including her muscular legs in the photograph. As one journalist put it, “Everyone loves her, but the marketing people think her legs are scary” (Nebenzahl) (See Fig. 10). Both of these women are powerful

athletes because of their strength, yet they and their sponsors go to extreme efforts to hide that strength from the public eye. Large muscles are unfeminine, and therefore they are often unwelcome in photographs of women's sports heroes.

Much like the dichotomy between rivals Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova, Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding also showed the essential difference between female athletes who display grace and beauty and those who rely on muscles and grim determination. Long before the scandal involving Harding's plot to injure Kerrigan before the Olympics in 1994, Harding was not the most popular choice for figure skating success. In a sport that judges athletes largely on grace, appearance, and femininity, Tonya Harding encountered many obstacles. In an article titled "Tonya Trashed," sportswriter Frank Rich wrote, "She was not glamorous. Her costumes reeked of polyester. She was known for mannish habits: shooting pool, cursing, repairing cars, shooting deer" (A21). Harding was simply too unfeminine, too low-class, too muscular, and too competitive to ever truly be accepted in the world of professional figure skating. As Mary Jo Festle points out, "Even though she was one of only two women in the world who could land a jump called a triple axel, Harding could not land endorsements." Her competition, on the other hand, the "long, lean, classically good-looking but less athletic Kerrigan... enjoyed contracts with Reebok, Campbell's Soup, Evian, and Northwest Airlines" (Festle xx) (See Fig. 11-12).

Ironically, once Kerrigan's true nature emerged and her all-American girl image was shattered, she, too, faced public rejection. After her very public attack in 1994, Nancy Kerrigan became America's sweetheart, her victimized face appearing on the front page of every sports section next to the caption "Why me?" She won the public's heart

as the traumatized young girl who fought back to win the silver medal at the Olympics that year. However, it didn't take long for the public to turn on their newfound hero as soon as she displayed some not-so-sweet attributes. During the Olympic medal ceremony, Kerrigan, understandably upset at losing the gold to Oksana Baiul, showed some anger while waiting for her to come out during the Olympic medal ceremony. Annoyed, she muttered "Oh, give me a break, she's just going to cry out there again. What's the difference?" (qtd. in Nelson). Shortly after the Olympics ended, Kerrigan traveled to Walt Disney World to take part in their parade. As one of her many corporate sponsors, they wanted her to ride on one of their floats and wave to the crowd. Unfortunately for Kerrigan, her microphone was on when she wasn't expecting it to be and she was caught saying "This is dumb. I hate it. This is the most corniest [sic] thing I have ever done." The backlash was immediate. Kerrigan's fans immediately demonized her comments, and reporters called her ungrateful and stuck up. Shortly after this snafu, Kerrigan lost her place as America's sweetheart. Mariah Burton Nelson comments on Kerrigan's downfall in her article, "I Won. I'm Sorry":

What were Kerrigan's crimes? She felt too old to cavort with cartoon characters. Isn't she? She expressed anger and disappointment – even bitterness and bad sportsmanship – about losing the gold. But wasn't she supposed to want to win? What happens to baseball players who, disappointed about a loss, hit each other or spit on umpires? What happens to basketball players and football players and hockey players who fight? Men can't tumble from a princess palace because we don't expect them to be princesses in the first place, only athletes. Americans fell out

of love with Kerrigan not because they couldn't adore an athlete who lacked grace in defeat, but because they couldn't adore a female athlete who lacked grace in defeat. (Nelson)

In the world of women's sports, what is often more important than one's athleticism and skill is one's general appeal to the American public. And an unfeminine demeanor prevents many talented athletes from ever achieving ultimate success.

Unfortunately, a significant part of a professional athlete's career can also be considered unfeminine – exhibiting a strong desire to win or winning too much. There have been several well-known and well-loved athletes who have experienced the sting of rejection once the public accuses them of being too competitive and “cutthroat.” For example, when Maureen Connolly first appeared on the tennis circuit, the public adored her. A *Newsweek* reporter described her as “the blonde, blue-eyed and bubbly Little Mo Connolly [who] was a distinct blessing to women's tennis... People are going to love her probably more than they've ever loved any other tennis player” (qtd. in Festle 68).

However, things quickly started to change once Connolly showed her competitive side. Suddenly, the public seemed to turn against her: the press portrayed her as ruthless, and many of her fans now espoused her future failures. Only a year after the *Newsweek* article, *Time* magazine proclaimed that “Little Mo [Grew] Up.” The article, covering the Wimbledon's women's singles championships in 1952, expected the “girlish, hard-playing bobby-soxer who wept with joy last September over winning the U.S. Women's title.” However, as the author describes, “Fans were soon puzzling over a change in Little Mo... it was obvious what it was: Little Mo had changed into Killer Connolly.” Throughout the article, phrases such as “awesome determination,” “smashing her way to

victory,” “all-out attacking,” “machine-like precision,” “cannonball abandon,” and “cool and unperturbed” described her style of play. It was apparent that the new “Killer Connolly” was not well-received. The author concludes that “There was an unladylike grimness about Maureen's playing that shocked most proper Britons into grudging admiration—and a keen wish to see her roundly trounced” (“Little Mo”). When Maureen Connolly represented a bright-eyed little girl entering into the world of professional tennis for fun, everyone loved her; however, once she displayed her competitive, hard-playing nature, she is described as an unladylike machine, as if her aggressiveness on the court made her not only somehow less than female, but also even less than human. It was this side of her that caused her fans and many sports reporters to suddenly want to see her fail. Her image had a direct impact on her reception as a professional woman athlete.

Maureen Connolly was not the only athlete who experienced backlash after winning too much. Chris Evert, another tennis player who was well-loved early in her career, was surprised when the fans turned on her after she became too successful beating her opponents. Evert, known for being one of the most “apologetic” female athletes of her time, became immensely popular because of her sweet “girl next door” demeanor she displayed off the court. Fans loved her even more because they could still see the feminine side of her *on* the court. She was often described as playing for her boyfriend in the stands, and never seeming to sweat or look disheveled. However, as her career went on, the woman who once stated that “No point is worth falling down over” lost her ladylike appeal as she became more and more ruthless on the court (qtd. in Festle 152). The more she won, the more the crowd seemed to turn on her. In 1981, B.J. Phillips wrote an article about her for *Time* magazine where he observed that “Her steely reserve,

unblinking will and emotionless court demeanor – together with a seemingly automatic baseline game – left the fans unmoved, then hostile... To the public, she seemed cool and haughty” (Phillips 78). As *Sports Illustrated* explained, “[Fans] adored her, briefly, when a 16-year-old schoolgirl reached the Forest Hills semifinals in 1971... But not long after that she came to be perceived as the Ice Maiden, and the romance cooled” (qtd. in Festle 244). Evert did not regain her image of the sweet all-American girl until she began losing to an even more unfeminine athlete: Martina Navratilova. Suddenly, Evert’s popularity surged once again as she became the one to root for against the “bionic sci-fi creature.” In her book *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women’s Sports*, Mary Jo Festle explains the “bitter paradox” of female professional athletes: “If they won, they lost. Doing what it took to win, it seemed, was what turned people off... A much bleaker interpretation is that a truly successful female athlete (no matter how apologetic) could not win” (244). All female athletes run the risk of alienating the public if they are too successful at their sport, because the competitive, aggressive behavior that makes this possible is considered too unappealing, too inappropriate, too *unfeminine*, for the female gender. Unfortunately, this leaves women with a difficult choice: be the best athlete they can be, or be the most well-loved athlete they can be – the two rarely coalesce.

### *Sex Sells: Emphasizing Feminine Attractiveness through Nudity and Sexuality*

Organized sports, such as the International Beach Volleyball Federation (FIVB), continue to protect feminine appearances through the use of particular required uniforms,



much like the AAGPBL's skirted attire. Shortly before the 2000 Olympic Games, the FIVB implemented a uniform rule that many of the volleyball players protested as unreasonable. Uniforms had moved beyond being simply "feminine," it seemed. The new look appeared to be nothing more than an attempt to show as much of the players' skin as possible. Sally Armstrong, a writer for the periodical *Chatelaine*, described the new uniforms as "the itsiest of itsy-bitsy bikinis... backless, scoop-neck, high-cut leg, body-hugging suits that have no more than six centimeters of fabric at the hip" (85) (See Fig. 13-14). Players felt that the new uniforms were difficult to perform in, as the bikini bottoms continually rode up and sand could not be kept out of the uniform. Thus, some players felt that their self-consciousness and discomfort impeded their game. On the other hand, men's uniforms were simply baggy shorts. During the previous Olympics, in 1996, the women's team was even forbidden to put on their warm-up pants during the medal ceremony, and instead the athletes were made to accept their medals in their skimpy uniforms (Nebenzahl). Laura Robinson, a journalist who is a former national-level cyclist and Nordic skier, points out, "We know what kind of power we take away from people when we take off their clothes... It's no coincidence that as marketing gets more and more important, women's outfits get smaller and smaller" (Nebenzahl). Uniforms such as those the FIVB require do more than simply emphasize femininity. Their purpose is also to display female athletes as sexually attractive by placing them in revealing clothing that is not the most conducive to participation in a competitive sport. However, function comes in second to form. As long as women can be sexy in their skimpy uniforms while they compete, their threat as powerful athletes is lessened. Why do the female athletes themselves go along with this? Sally Armstrong explains that "the

athletes know that if you want a sponsor, you need attention, a photo in the paper. And who gets photographed? The babes, that's who. So, babes it is." Kristine Drakich, one of the members of the Olympic beach volleyball team in 1996, agrees, explaining "It is very difficult to survive in this unless you go along with sexist stereotypes or unless you have money of your own" (Armstrong 90).

Efforts to accentuate femininity or sexuality through appearance go further than clothes, hair, and nails when female athletes agree to pose nude, or nearly nude, in photographs. In order to get the attention from the "babe photos" that Sally Armstrong described, many female athletes take it to the next level. Danica Patrick, Anna Kournikova, Brandi Chastain and all of the others are, in essence, proving that they are still women that men would find attractive. All of their toughness, strength, and determination fade when they pose provocatively, donning a "come-hither" stare. Such vulnerability and sensuality dissolve any doubt that these women have lost their femininity on the playing field, which therefore lessens the threat they may have posed to society's rigid system of social values.

During the 2003 "This is Who I Am" campaign for the WNBA, Sue Bird, wearing a spaghetti strap dress, declared to the camera, "I'm not as sweet as you think I am." This caption accompanied all of her photos. As if to prove this statement, Bird appeared in the Summer 2003 issue of *Dime* magazine, a basketball publication, proving that she can still be a sexy, attractive woman as well as an athlete. Throughout the article, the only photos of Bird were ones taken during a sexy photo shoot; there were no action shots included of her career on the court. One photo featured Bird, heavily made-up and with ringlet curls, wearing a denim jacket with no top underneath. She holds a basketball

strategically in front of her bare chest (See Fig. 15). Another photo shows Bird wearing nothing but spiky high heels and an Allen Iverson jersey, which slips off of one shoulder as she sits on a surface of blue velvet and stares seductively at the camera (See Fig. 16). Yet another photo places her in a fully reclined position. Wearing the same jersey and cradling a basketball under one arm, Bird lies on a bed with white sheets, her hair splayed out in shiny, carefully arranged curls behind her (See Fig. 17). One interesting detail here is that she is poses in an *Allen Iverson* jersey. Why not pose in her own jersey? She is, after all, supposed to be a professional basketball player, as well. The message this sends to the public seems to be that her career is not as valid as an NBA player's career. All she can do is pose naked with his jersey on, because being an athlete is second to being an attractive woman. Bird seems to know exactly what the purpose of this photo shoot is during her interview, where she states matter-of-factly, "It's no lie that sex sells... But, like I said, whatever draws fans is a good thing. We have some beautiful women in the league... There's no reason to hide it" (qtd. in Levesque). To be recognized as a successful female athlete, not only are women encouraged not to hide it; they are encouraged to do everything they can to flaunt it. For Bird, this interview did lessen her threat as one of the WNBA's top stars. *Dime* magazine referred to her as "possibly the perfect woman – and the best reason we've seen for us to pay attention to women's basketball" (qtd. in Levesque). Women's professional sport teams often get this kind of reaction – they are not interesting to the public until the athletes prove themselves to be ideal women in every way.

Later, Bird again emphasized her sex appeal in an effort to "draw the radio talent and listeners to Storm games" (qtd. in Merron). In an on-air interview with sports-radio

host Mitch Levy, Bird bet Levy that her “assists-to-turnover ratio [would] be better than 2-to-1” (Merron). If Bird won the bet, Levy would be “forced” to purchase season tickets to the 2004 Storm season. If Levy won the bet, he would give Bird a spanking on the air where she would have to respond with “Harder, daddy, harder.” With this interview, Bird not only succeeded in making herself a sexual object to the listening public and Levy, but she also undermined professional women’s basketball by suggesting season tickets as a “punishment” a man would have to endure.

Sue Bird is not the only woman athlete who feels compelled to emphasize her sexuality in order to gain more publicity and support in her career. Jan Stephenson, a former member of the LPGA who won sixteen events and earned more than three million dollars on golf tours, is perhaps better known to some for her sexy photo poses than her career as a serious golfer. In a November 2003 interview with *Golf Magazine*, Stephenson was asked about the tendency for the LPGA to “sell sex.” She responded by saying, “We have to promote sex appeal. It’s a fact of life. The people who watch are predominantly male, and they won’t keep watching if the girls aren’t beautiful” (Kessler). Stephenson does not even mention the talent of the players as a factor in building a fan base. It is only their beauty and sex appeal that has the potential to draw fans. Stephenson believed these “facts of life” to be true in her own career, and she often attempted to gain endorsements and fan loyalty by showing the public that she was full of sex appeal. At the U.S. Open in 1983, fans could purchase posters of Stephenson in a wet t-shirt (Kessler). Laura Diaz, a current LPGA golfer, recalls Stephenson posing “for an LPGA-produced magazine that showed her in a Marilyn Monroe-like pinup photo and appear[ing] seductively on a self-published poster bearing the suggestive line, *PLAY A*

*ROUND WITH ME!!*” (Diaz). In 1986, Stephenson posed for what has now become a very famous photo – she lie naked in a bathtub full of golf balls, the balls placed carefully so that they covered certain parts of her body (See Fig. 18). Even now, Stephenson admits that she still has people asking her to sign that particular photo of herself all the time. She explained to the reporter, Peter Kessler, that those kinds of actions are necessary because “The women are not the best players – the men are. The women are not the best athletes – the men are. Whether we like it or not, we have to promote sex, because sex sells. I think you have to shock” (Kessler). Stephenson believes that it is not women’s athleticism that will attract people to their sport – it is their bodies.

Laura Baugh, a contemporary of Stephenson’s, also used her body and her sex appeal to her advantage. Like Anna Kournikova today, Baugh never won a single title during the course of her career. However, she still succeeded in being one of the highest paid, most well-known golfers of her time because of all of the endorsements she earned through her sexy appearance. According to Martin R. Farrally and Alastair J. Cochran, authors of the book *Science and Golf III: Proceedings of the World Scientific Congress of Golf*, “merit took a back seat when mediocre but shapely Laura Baugh earned ‘up to half million dollars a year off the golf course’ while world record tournament winner Kathy Whitworth took 22 years and around 80 victories to make \$1 million” (Farrally and Cochran 319). Baugh managed to do so well financially simply because she made herself a popular player by emphasizing her beauty and her attractiveness to males.

After her infamous sports bra-revealing action during the U.S. Women’s World Cup championships in 1999, Brandi Chastain garnered instant celebrity status (See Fig. 19). Many reporters tried to sexualize her celebratory move, commenting on the sexiness

of her abs or the unsavory intentions she may have had. Chastain denied that there was anything behind her instinct to pull off her jersey other than pure emotional excitement. However, now that Chastain was in the spotlight, the sponsorship offers began to pour in. David Letterman invited her onto the *Late Show*, where he referred to the women's team as "Babe City," populated by "Soccer Mamas" (Sullivan). As part of her newfound fame and official "babe" status, Chastain was asked to pose nude in *Gear* magazine, an offer which she accepted. In their October 1999 issue, Chastain posed for several photos for the adult men's magazine where she donned cleats on her feet and nothing else. Strategically placed soccer balls covered certain areas of her body in every photo, but suddenly this powerful woman who had led her team to victory in the world soccer championships appeared to be nothing more than a giggling siren playing with a soccer ball (See Fig. 20-21). Any male who may have been intimidated or "put off" by her bulging biceps and powerful legs on that field a few short months before would now be faced with a completely different, completely non-threatening image of this accomplished athlete. Now, she poses in a crouched, almost self-conscious position that minimizes her muscles and her powerful abilities.

The list of female athletes posing nude or emphasizing their seductive sides seems endless. Why do so many women feel the need to temper their athletic skills with sexy appearances? In an article for *The Village Voice*, Joanna Cagan makes an interesting point about the increasing trend of nudity among female athletes when she quotes Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota. Cagan writes:

A decade ago it was enough to just feminize female athletes. *Sports Illustrated* gave us Steffi Graf in a glamorous dress; a buzz was generated around Flo-Jo's fingernails. But times have changed. "You've got to increase the stakes in terms of the backlash," Kane says. "You move from putting her in an evening gown to taking her evening gown off." (Cagan)

In order for women to be successful in the professional sports world, they often need to "up the ante." It is not enough anymore, necessarily, to just prove they are real women in addition to being athletes; they need to be the *ideal* woman: sexy, confident, and attractive to males.

### *Sugar and Spice: The Portrayal of Female Professional Athletes as Sweet Little Girls*

In addition to emphasizing femininity through appearances, demeanor, or attractiveness to males, the threat of female athletes is sometimes also reduced by presenting them as innocent, childlike little girls. As Patricia Clasen explains, whereas "women athletes promote femininity through sexuality, 'girl' athletes promote their femininity through fragility and dependence" (40). In 1994, the Women's Sports Foundation published a document titled "Words to Watch," a set of guidelines for the media promoting equal treatment for male and female athletes in sports reporting. One of the guidelines states that women should never be referred to as "girls" unless they are under twelve years of age ("Media"). However, although you would never hear adult male athletes referred to as "boys," it is very common for female sports figures to be

represented as “girls.” In a recent article in *Sports Illustrated*, Tony Kanaan, the former Indy Racing League champion, was asked what he thought about Danica Patrick’s participation in the Indianapolis 500. He responded, “If she wins, it could mean so much to the IRL and the whole open-wheel sport... That’s a lot of weight for a little girl to carry on her back” (“Focus”). By calling her a “little girl,” Kanaan effectively diminishes her talents and presents her as a weak, immature individual.

Kanaan isn’t the only one who portrays Patrick as an innocent little girl, however. In 2005, Patrick appeared in an advertisement for *Secret* antiperspirant, the antiperspirant that claims to be the only one “strong enough for a woman.” Even though *Secret* touts strength as part of its advertising campaign, it wanted to minimize the strength of its female star as much as possible in order to appeal to a broad audience. In small print at the bottom of the page, the ad names Danica Patrick as the 2005 Indy 500 Rookie of the Year, but it pictures her in a flowing pink chiffon gown, long hair blowing in the wind, next to the caption “My Secret: Deep down, I’m a girly girl.” Patrick’s high stiletto heel rests on top of her racing helmet, declaring in a symbolic way which part of her life really comes first (See Fig. 22). Next to Patrick, the text of the ad reads “Strength with a soft touch. That’s Secret Platinum with Olay. And the perfect description of Danica Patrick. Who’s gonna tell her that helmets and high heels don’t go together?” Her “girly girl” side, that little girl image of long hair and pink chiffon, overshadows any accomplishment she has made on the racetrack.

This way of speaking about women athletes as little girls is nothing new in the sports world. In a 1972 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, Cathy Rigby, an Olympic gymnast, was featured in an article titled “Sugar and Spice – and Iron.” Just referring to the old



adage of “sugar and spice” reminds the reader that that is supposedly what “little girls are made of.” Her strength, the “iron” side of her, cannot stand alone – it has to be juxtaposed with the image of little girl sweetness. Even though the picture spanning the first two pages of the article is Rigby performing a nude splits on a balance beam – a very sexualized, adult image – the text of the article continues to refer to her as a childlike young girl (See Fig. 23). Bud Marquette, her coach, is quoted as saying, “I never had anyone like her, and I guess I’ll never find another one, either. She is the typical little American girl. A nice, clean kid. The American ideal. Something like Shirley Temple.” Her mother states that “She sucked her thumb until she was 11,” and the author of the article points out that “She wears a size three junior petite. Marquette calls her ‘Peanut’ or ‘Shrimp’” (Verschoth 23-24). Rigby’s power is diminished when she is reduced to a “little girl,” a “nice kid,” “Shirley Temple,” and a “Peanut” who only recently stopped sucking her thumb.

Michelle Wie, a recent golfing sensation, is also shown as a little girl in a man’s world. *Time* magazine described her as possessing “Pinup looks and giggly charm – deployable in English, Korean, Japanese, and teenspeak (pop star Rain... and Hayden Christiansen are ‘supercute’; her prom dress this year is ‘soooo pink’)” (Chu). A nine page profile of Wie in *Fortune* magazine in 2005 goes back and forth, first presenting Wie as a glamorous, sexy female golfer, then switching gears to portray her as a child. *Fortune* may have this conflict because, as they put it, Wie is “on the verge” of womanhood. Not knowing whether to present her as a sexpot or as a little girl, they present her as both and explain that she is between the two stages. One thing is clear: the article focuses more on categorizing Wie into an acceptable feminine role than it does on

her golfing. The article begins with a full page photo of Wie, a close-up of her from the shoulders up. The photo is shot in such a way that Wie almost appears to be naked, although closer inspection does reveal the corner of a small tank top or even a bra. She stares straight ahead into the camera with slightly disheveled hair and a smoldering expression (See Fig. 24). The article describes her body as “long and curvy,” and details her “movie-star looks” when it relates her appearance on David Letterman months before: “Lipman [her image consultant] dressed her in Dolce & Gabbana heels and a slinky Alexander McQueen top that made the TV host stammer. Over six feet tall, with creamy skin and black sloping eyes, Michelle Wie is a knockout” (Brooker 86) (See Fig. 25). On the same page, however, Brooker convinces her readers that Wie is not all grown up yet:

She worries about getting fat. She loves movies and shopping and gossip. Even when she talks about her career, at times she is more schoolgirl than pro golfer. “My agent says he might be able to arrange for me to meet Brad Pitt!” she tells me excitedly. At one point, as we drive through Oahu traffic, Michelle lances at an instant message from her cousin in Los Angeles. “Ohmigod!” she suddenly squeals. “Johnny Depp is getting his hand put, you know, in Hollywood!... I love Johnny Depp.” (Brooker 86)

Out of ten photographs featured in the article, only two are of Wie on the greens, playing her sport. Two photos show her “looking sexy,” three are photos of her as a little girl between the ages of four to seven, and the final three show her relationship with her parents. Of those photos, one pictures her crying with her head buried in her mother’s chest after “a tough loss,” and another shows her appearing to sleep on her father’s

shoulder on her way to practice (See Fig. 26). What is *not* highlighted in this article or the accompanying photos is the strength and determination this woman has that allows her to be successful in the realm of professional golf. However, that may be because for the success of her career, her talent may not be the most important thing. Because of Wie's assurance of childlike innocence and young adult attractiveness and femininity, Brooker concludes that "For sure, Michelle Wie will be a pretty package, one that any advertiser would be after" (88).

Gymnasts and figure skaters are the most frequent victims of what is sometimes termed "infantilization." In an article about the 1992 Olympic Games, *Time Magazine* profiled a fifteen-year-old gymnast named Shannon Miller. The reporter, Jill Smolowe, wrote: "There is something almost other-worldly about the hazel-eyed Miller. Her ghostly paleness and thin frame give her a misleadingly fragile appearance. She conveys a sense that she doesn't speak unless spoken to; her favorite answer is 'I don't know.' When working out, she constantly looks as if she might break into tears" (56). By representing Miller as a delicate, sensitive, uncertain, pale little girl, Smolowe is stripping away all of the prestige Miller deserves and lessening her immense athletic power. However, Miller also comes across as less threatening because of her frail nature, so the general public would not be uncomfortable with her dominating athleticism.

Another *Time Magazine* article covering the 1998 Olympic Games called Tara Lipinski, a fifteen-year-old gymnast, a "carefree sprite." In the Webster's New World Dictionary, a "sprite" is defined as "A small or elusive supernatural being; an elf or pixie." The reporter, Nadya Labi, also went on to refer to Lipinski as "a tiny confection of a girl." She describes her performance in the short program as follows: "In a fairy-tale

blue-and-yellow frock, she flew to the Anastasia sound track, whipping through her triple flip, exploding into a grin that dwarfed her 80-pound frame and skating circles around everyone but Kwan” (Labi) (See Fig. 27). By focusing on Lipinski’s dainty appearance, her “fairy-tale” skating outfit, and her resemblance to a sugary food product, Labi presents the teenager as a super-sweet, smiling little girl who almost seems to skate more for the princess-like quality of the outfits than her competitive edge. Even when Labi describes the moment when six judges place her first after one of her performances, she makes her sound like a little girl who has just received an exciting present: “She squealed and leaped into the air. She had it, the medal to match her gold metallic nails.” Labi continues “infantilizing” Lipinski throughout the article, mentioning her tendency to overuse exclamation points in her diary entries, her interest in “[making] stickers on the day of the finals,” her “yearly pilgrimage to Disney World,” and her exclamation of “Isn’t it neat!” in response to Picabo Street’s medal winning performance (Labi). All of Lipinski’s strength and talent are therefore unthreatening when overshadowed by her cute, little-girl exterior.

Likewise, gymnast Dominique Moceanu has been described by her coach, Bela Karolyi, as “a little bird on a wire, all the time fluttering, chirping and playing to the crowd” (Nelson). It is difficult to picture a male gymnast being described in such a way, but for a female athlete, especially gymnasts and figure skaters, such characterizations are relatively commonplace in order to convince society that these women are nothing to fear. They are still vulnerable little girls underneath all of that apparent strength and confidence.

Occasionally, women athletes are presented as girls just having fun. After the United States women's soccer team won the World Cup in 1999, their victory celebration was described by *People* Magazine with the report "the girls get even rowdier, tearing into bags of pink cotton candy and giggling nonstop on the team bus." Tiffeny Milbrett, a forward on the team, is quoted as saying "it was like a slumber party." The team is also described as "hamming it up alongside Mickey Mouse" when they participated in a parade at Disneyland after their win. Alex Tresniowski, the author of the article, ends it by writing, "Cotton candy, Mickey Mouse and loving grandmas – guess that wholesome, goody-goody thing is for real" (Tresniowski 54-59). Likewise, a *Sports Illustrated* article covering Danica Patrick's participation in the Indy 500 made a point of mentioning that Patrick is a former high school cheerleader who "has been known to smile and even giggle at times" ("Focus"). Again, such childlike characterizations lessen the potential for discomfort in the face of strong female athletes.

#### *Not Her First Love: Emphasizing the Female Athlete's Interest in Feminine Activities*

Another important method of creating an aura of femininity among women athletes is simply to show them expressing an interest in "typically feminine" activities. In an effort to show the world that the masculine domain of sports is secondary to their true interests, female athletes have been shown to enjoy activities such as cooking, sewing, and spending time as a wife and mother to their families. In 1948, a Dutch runner named Fanny Blankers-Koen received considerable public attention when she won

four Olympic gold medals. A newspaper called *The London Daily Graphic* did not focus on her athletic success, however, when it published an article titled “Fastest Woman in the World is an Expert Cook.” The fact that she was the fastest woman in the world was represented as almost secondary to her cooking ability. The article also makes a point of mentioning that “Outside of racing, housework is her greatest love” (qtd. in Nelson). Because Blankers-Koen epitomizes traditional femininity with her reported love of cooking and housework, she is offered as a non-threatening representative of female athleticism.

Even in the very beginning of her career, Chris Evert’s accomplishments came hand in hand with reports of her desire for a more feminine role in life. Tennis was represented merely as something to pass the time until she could fulfill her true dream of being a wife and mother. In a 1973 *Time Magazine* article, Evert discussed her desire to quit professional tennis sometime in the following three to five years. She explained, “Too long a tennis career can ruin a girl and harden her. Tennis isn’t the most important thing in my life. It’s so materialistic. Marriage and family are more important, and so is religion – and love. I’d rather be known for being a girl than for being a tennis player” (“Chris Evert”). Evert seemed to be agreeing with depictions of women athletes as unfeminine when she worried that by staying too long in her sport she may be “ruined” or “hardened.” She also acknowledged that one cannot be considered both a “girl” and a “tennis player” simultaneously, as she felt compelled to choose between the two. She, like many others, believed that femininity and professional sports were mutually exclusive. She could either be known as a girl or an athlete, not both, and her priority was made clear.

When Chris Evert announced her retirement in 1989, *Sports Illustrated* featured her on the cover of their August 28<sup>th</sup> issue with the caption “I’m Going To Be A Full-time Wife” (See Fig. 28). Instead of depicting her in a way that highlights her extremely successful tennis career, the only thing *Sports Illustrated* readers get to see is a smiling Evert, happily trading in her tennis shoes for a traditional female role. Inside the article, Evert explains that she is ready to give up professional tennis because she has finally found her niche, where she belongs. She has found her niche “as Mrs. Andy Mill, as a full-time wife.” She expresses excitement over the idea that she can “shop for groceries, peel vegetables and cook!” To fully complete her domestic role, Evert reports that “People often ask me what will I do at next year’s U.S. Open. Hopefully, I’ll be very pregnant by then.” On the final page of the article, Evert is pictured sitting on the back of her husband’s motorcycle, clutching his shoulders in such a way that her sparkling wedding ring is prominently featured. The caption reads: “Andy sat me down and said, ‘Look, you don’t need tennis anymore.’ He was right” (Kirkpatrick 80). Out of the twenty pictures included in the article, only seven of them showed Evert actively involved in tennis; the other thirteen photographs showed her with various family members and boyfriends. Even though the article in *Sports Illustrated* was supposed to revolve around Chris Evert’s career and recent retirement, more emphasis was put on her familial relationships and her participation in traditional feminine activities like cooking, grocery shopping, being a full-time wife, and anticipating eventual motherhood. Unfortunately, her prodigious career was largely neglected in favor of offering a non-threatening view of the former tennis champion.

Frequent mentions of feminine activities, marriage, and children served another purpose in addition to simply assuring the American public that women athletes continue to be womanly in appearance and attitude. Such references also implicitly affirm heterosexuality, overcoming the common stereotype of lesbianism associated with women's sports. In addition to causing discomfort through their participation and success in the traditionally male realm of professional sport, female athletes continue to incite fear that their masculine behaviors will result in same-sex attraction. Because of this underlying fear, athletes, their sponsors, and the media have, either unknowingly or intentionally, employed subtle methods of combating the stereotypical image.



### **Chapter 3: Emphasizing the Heterosexuality of the Female Professional Athlete**

#### *Mastering the Casual Mention of Husbands: Public Assurance of the Heterosexuality of Female Professional Athletes*

In a 2005 episode of *The Simpsons* titled “There’s Something About Marrying,” Marge’s sister Selma comes out of the closet and tells her family that she is a lesbian. When she brings her new girlfriend, Veronica, to the Simpson house to introduce her to her family, Marge, attempting to make small-talk, asks, “So, Veronica, what do you do?” Veronica responds, “I’m a pro golfer.” Marge, unfazed, turns away and mumbles under her breath, “Hmm... no surprises there” (“There’s Something About Marrying”).

The stereotype of the lesbian professional athlete is not a new one in our culture. One of the greatest obstacles faced by women in sport is the assumption that a woman who plays sports for a living is somehow automatically rejecting her femininity and heterosexuality. Often, simply by demonstrating a strong feminine nature through the use of the tactics mentioned previously, the stereotype of the “mannish” lesbian athlete is defeated. As Susan Cahn explains, “femininity and heterosexuality [are] viewed as one and the same” (350). Therefore, if one can assert her femininity strongly enough, her sexual preference will be conveyed clearly and her threat lessened. However, any female professional athlete who does not go to great lengths to assert her attractiveness to men or to prove her femininity runs the risk of being labeled a lesbian. In fact, it is the desire to

distance themselves from this label that directs the career choices of many women athletes.

Traditionally, certain sports have been targeted more than others as attracting lesbian players. According to Pat Griffin, a former athlete and coach who wrote the book *Strong Women, Deep Closets*, “Lesbian participation is often associated with team sports, professional sports, sports in which the competitors are older, or sports that are not consistent with traditional feminine expectations of appearance and performance” (55). For example, gymnasts and figure skaters are not typically accused of lesbianism because they are younger athletes participating in an individual sport that seems more feminine, since it relies heavily on grace, an attractive appearance, and feminine attire. Sports such as basketball and softball, however, are in danger of being associated with lesbian athletes since they are team sports that require their athletes to perform in a more “masculine” fashion. Golf and tennis, while individual sports, are also at greater risk for lesbian associations because their players are typically older and are often compared directly to male players (Griffin 55). Therefore, it is more often the players involved with sports like basketball, softball, tennis, and golf that find themselves having to either constantly convince the public of their heterosexuality, or keep their homosexuality well-hidden so as not to draw even more unwanted stereotypes to their sport or lose potential sponsors for themselves.

There are several ways in which players are continually asserting their heterosexuality. Some of these methods are less blatant than others. When reporters or women athletes themselves discuss their boyfriends, husbands, and kids, it assures the general public that they have not lost that feminine side of themselves that allows them to

desire and be desired by men. Even though Chris Evert was a powerful athlete, for example, reports of “some unabashed on-court smooching” between her and her boyfriend at the time, Jimmy Connors, verified her heterosexuality had not suffered (“Chris Evert”).

Even if she does not have a man in her life at the time, references are often made to a female athlete being “on the lookout” for a husband or boyfriend. In 1954, Betty Hicks wrote an article for *The Saturday Evening Post* chronicling life on the professional women’s golf tour titled “Next to Marriage We’ll Take Golf;” the article’s title alone immediately declared the heterosexuality of each tour participant. Just as Chris Evert made it sound as though tennis was just something to fill the time until she had a family of her own, Hicks reports that “Most of the single pros admittedly are keeping one eye on the ball and the other peeled for a likely prospect to lure them from the circuit to the altar.” Later, while complimenting a colleague’s talents, Hicks says “Unless she meets her man, which is more than likely, Betsy Rawls will surely be the No. 1 star of the circuit in the years ahead.” Here, Hicks is presenting Rawls’ possibility of meeting a man as the end of her career, which indicates that she would either be unwillingly pressured to quit the tour, or she would choose to live the life of a housewife and be perfectly satisfied. In fact, Hicks indicates that it would be staying on the tour that would make one *unsatisfied*. She quotes another player, Betty MacKinnon, who asks her companions incredulously, ““Can you imagine spending the rest of your life in golf tournaments?”” Hicks explains that no one could imagine a life like this for MacKinnon, as she “always commands a retinue of male admirers wherever she plays.” The assumption here is that no woman who has a future possibility for marriage would ever

choose to play a sport instead. The sport simply becomes a means of passing the time until the athlete reaches her true goal of marriage and motherhood. Again, Hicks shares their feminine desires when she quotes another player on the tour, Betsy Rawls, who declares, “There’s only one thing that could be more fascinating than golf... That would be raising children.” Hicks also expresses pity for anyone on the tour without a significant other. Regarding Patty Berg, Hicks writes: “At times Patty seems a tragically lonely individual, with no love but golf” (Hicks 92). By pointing out that all of the women on the tour are either married or interested in being married, Hicks not only confirms their feminine interests but also their heterosexuality.

Babe Didrikson, considered by many to be the greatest female athlete of all time because of her incredible talent in multiple sports, was often chastised by the sports media for looking and acting too masculine. It wasn’t until Didrikson married George Zaharias, a very large professional wrestler, that Didrikson gained widespread acceptance. There seemed to be an almost audible sigh of relief as a headline celebrated “Babe is a Lady Now: The World’s Most Amazing Athlete Has Learned to Wear Nylons and Cook for Her Huge Husband” (Cahn 351). With her marriage, the American public could reconcile themselves with Didrikson’s masculine qualities, as long as they could be assured of a heterosexual lifestyle.

Babe Didrikson first gained attention as the star player for the Golden Cyclones, a women’s basketball team sponsored by the Employers Casualty Company (ECC). She was spotted during one of her high school basketball games and recruited by Melvin Jackson McCombs, the manager of the athletic teams for the ECC. He convinced her to leave school and head to Dallas, where she would be given a job at the company as a

stenographer and play for their well-known team. Didrikson accepted the offer, and in 1930, began her career as a serious athlete. Later that year, McCombs suggested that Didrikson also try her talents in track and field. While leading her basketball team to the national championships two years in a row by averaging forty two points a game, Didrikson began honing her skills in several track and field events as well.

The public really took notice of Didrikson when she competed in the women's Amateur Athletic Union Track and Field Championships, which also acted as the qualifying events for the 1932 Olympics. As one reporter summarizes, "Of the 10 events, Babe competed in eight, won six, broke world records in four (javelin, 80-meter hurdles, baseball throw, high jump) and set an American record in a fifth (the shot put). She also won the long jump and placed fourth in the discus. One reporter called it 'the most amazing series of performances ever accomplished by an individual, male or female, in track-and-field history'" (Postman). Unfortunately, following the rules at that time, Didrikson was only allowed to compete in three events in the Olympics. She broke world records in all three, earning gold medals in everything but the high jump, where she lost the gold to another American based on a technicality (the judges did not like her style of jump – although she cleared the bar, they ruled that she was not allowed to dive headfirst over it, a rule that no longer exists today).

Although the general public and many well-known sports reporters were clearly impressed by her athletic accomplishments, much of the commentary about the new female phenomenon revolved around her unfeminine appearance and demeanor (See Fig. 29). Paul Gallico, a famous sportswriter and later, a golf partner and friend to Babe Didrikson, even wrote several statements about her that seem surprising, coming from

someone who claimed to be a supporter. William O. Johnson and Nancy P. Williamson, sportswriters who wrote regularly for *Sports Illustrated*, co-authored a biography of Babe Didrikson's life called "*Whatta-Gal*": *The Babe Didrikson Story*. Johnson and Williamson recall that Gallico once reported that Didrikson was one of the "women who made possible deliciously frank and biological discussions in the newspapers as to whether this or that woman athlete should be addressed as Miss, Mrs., Mr. or It" (20). In other articles, he also described her "hatchet face," her "pale slit" of a mouth, and her "door-stop jaw" (qtd. in Postman). He even called her a "muscle moll," one of the most feared terms of all female athletes of this time period, in a 1932 *Vanity Fair* article (Gallico 36). Even while complimenting her abilities, he managed to insult her appearance, like when he wrote that "The best all-around performer this country has ever known was a hard-bitten, hawk-nosed, thin-mouthed little hoyden from Texas" (qtd. in Lipsyte). Even her behavior was described in masculine, or at the very least, unladylike, terms. One article titled "The World-Beating Girl Viking of Texas" covered her success in the Olympics by describing her "Viking capacity for berserk rage," her "hot resolve," and her "soaring confidence in her own power of achievement" (26). This same article also went on to describe her physique in another rather unflattering account:

She is lean and flat, with big arms and leg muscles, large hands, and the rather angular jaw which the magazine illustrators have established as the standard for cowboys. This chin of the Babe's, the thin, set lips, the straight, sharp profile, the sallow suntan, undisguised by rouge, regarded in connection with her amazing athletic prowess, at first acquaintance are likely to do her no justice. ("The World-Beating Girl Viking" 28)

Didrikson read all of these descriptions and admitted to one reporter “I know I’m not pretty, but I do try to be graceful” (qtd. in Postman). However, Didrikson did not do much to dispel her tomboy image. In fact, she seemed to revel in it. When one reporter from a Dallas newspaper asked her if she wore girdles and other traditional feminine undergarments, Didrikson snapped, “The answer is no. What do you think I am, a sissy?” (qtd. in Johnson 74). For Babe Didrikson, her early career may have followed more of a “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” mentality. According to Johnson and Williamson, “She seemed to glory in a coarse demeanor, which implied that if she could not be feminine and pretty, then she would be as *unfeminine* and *unpretty* as possible” (Johnson 74). She swore, boasted, wore track suits to compete, and made it very clear that she was not the average woman. Once, when a *New York Times* reporter asked her if there was anything she *didn’t* play, Didrikson replied, without missing a beat, “Yeah, dolls” (qtd. in Postman).

However, soon Babe Didrikson began to play an active role in changing her public persona. Perhaps she tired of all of the references to “muscle molls” and the occasional reports of mothers forbidding their daughters to play sports because they didn’t want them to “turn out like Babe.” Didrikson once admitted her self-consciousness about how she was seen by the public in a rare candid comment, stating, “Sometimes, in those early barnstorming days, I wasn’t sure if people were laughing with or at me” (qtd. in Postman). As Susan E. Cayleff, an Associate Professor in the Department of Women’s Studies at San Diego State University suggests:

She reveled in the (early) persona of the boyish, brazen, unbeatable renegade, but cringed at the innuendos of abnormality. She was the

consummate tomboy – beating boys at their own games. In fact, “boyishness” was tolerable and even engaging; “mannishness,” on the other hand, insinuated a confirmed condition out of which she would not grow. (Cayleff)

In other words, it may have been more acceptable, even “cute,” for Babe Didrikson to be a tomboy in her younger years. However, as her fame increased and the years passed, the offhandedly charming tomboy was becoming dangerously manly.

There was also increasing speculation in the press about Didrikson’s romantic activities. Did she ever have a male love interest? Some members of the press worried that she might be “mannish” in more areas than just sports. One 1933 *Redbook* article, in writing about her personal life, mentioned that Didrikson liked men to just “horse around with her” and not “make love.” The author then noted that Didrikson seemed fonder of her best girlfriends than she was of any man (Marston 60).

Didrikson, a woman who had often been referred to as a “sportswriter’s dream,” because of her willingness to give interviews whenever and wherever they were requested, knew that her image in the media could make or break her career. In the days before women could earn much in the way of prize money in their sport, much of the money Didrikson made after the Olympics came from exhibition events, staged photo sessions, and sponsorship deals. If rumors about her sexuality and “mannishness” were to continue, her livelihood could be in jeopardy. It is also possible that Babe Didrikson may have wanted to shock the public with her new feminine image simply to keep herself in the news. One of her competitors once complained that she had “a five-year-old’s hunger for attention,” and Didrikson was known to have made up many outlandish stories



to help her own legend grow (Postman). For instance, she frequently lied about her birthdate, so much so that not even her own sister was completely sure about what year to put on her gravestone at first. She did this to make herself sound like she won all of those events at the Olympics at younger and younger ages. While most historians believe she was actually twenty one at the time of her Olympic feats, many news articles at the time reported that she was nineteen, and later, when she was applying for a visa, she stated that the year of her birth was 1919 instead of 1911, making her only thirteen years old at the time of the Olympics (Johnson and Williamson 35).

Whatever the reason, Babe Didrikson set off on a very intentional, careful campaign to change her image from “mannish,” rough, and possibly lesbian, to a heterosexual, feminine, and mainstream woman of the time. Asked by one reporter to “reveal the secret of her success” after her Olympic victories, Didrikson ended by saying, “I have been asked if I could give advice to girls on how to be better athletes, but I am afraid that the only real first class advice I can give is get toughened up playing the boys’ games, but DON’T GET TOUGH. There’s a lot of difference there” (Johnson and Williamson 52). The message here seemed to be that girls can become better athletes by playing the same sports boys do, even playing alongside boys, but they must draw a careful line between playing with the boys and becoming *one of* the boys. Realizing that she needed to present a different persona to the public in order to follow her own advice, Didrikson’s first step was to choose a more ladylike sport in which to be a champion: golf.

Golf is a sport that allows women to maintain a more feminine demeanor than many of Didrikson’s previous sports, like basketball and track and field. Here, the athlete

could be in shape without being muscular and remain in a skirt and makeup throughout her game. Didrikson became friends with a woman named Bertha Bowen, whom she enlisted to help “ladify her” (qtd. in Postman). Bowen transformed Didrikson’s wardrobe, encouraged her to wear traditional undergarments such as nylons and slips, and taught her how to apply makeup and style her hair (See Fig. 30). Betty Hicks, a golf champion at the time, noted that “while Didrikson remained ‘back-alley tough and barroom crude,’ she did ‘develop the sensitivity to acquire certain layers of the veneer of femininity. She painted her fingernails, curled her hair, put on high heels and wore lace-trimmed dresses’” (Lipsyte). At this point in time, Didrikson, who used to fly into a rage whenever she was asked about marriage, also started regaling the press with stories about various dates and boyfriends she had had throughout high school and beyond, even going so far as to tell about two boys who fought over her, and one boy she almost married (they got as close as “a block from the preacher’s house” before she supposedly called it off) (qtd. in Postman). Close friends of Didrikson’s, and even her own sister, did not remember her ever having any interest in or contact with boys other than competing against them in sports. Her timely stories were all part of her image reconstruction: by telling the public that, even if there was no man in her life at the moment, there had been men in her past, she was assuring them that she was not the “mannish” athlete they assumed her to be. Her ultimate femininity was preserved with the knowledge that she was a “confirmed” heterosexual.

Not long after Didrikson’s image campaign began, she met George Zaharias, a former professional wrestler. Didrikson made their relationship sound like a kind of match made in heaven when she discussed it with reporters. The two were married in

1938, and sportswriters couldn't get enough of the change in Babe Didrikson. In an article for *Amateur Athlete*, Roxy Andersen delightfully described how "along came a great big he-man wrestler and the Babe forgot all her man-hating chatter" (39).

Didrikson's marriage created a huge stir among sportswriters and the general public because it provided a kind of relief that what they had feared and suspected for so long – Babe Didrikson preferred women – was just a bad dream. Now the "true" Babe Didrikson was being revealed after all these years: the mannish super-athlete just had to grow out of her tomboy state and reach full womanhood.

Reporters jumped on the story of a domesticated Babe Didrikson. Frank Frawley, a writer for *The Saturday Evening Post*, wrote a brief article titled "Whatever Became of Babe Didrikson." Frawley assured his readers that she was better than ever five years into her marriage:

Time and matrimony have tempered the Babe's once somewhat-rough-and-ready ways. With the same deftness that she displayed in sports, she has mastered cooking, interior decorating, curtain making, Victory gardening and other housewifely arts. Now as attentive to her clothes and coiffure as any other married woman, she has evolved from a tomboyish, often blunt-spoken, athlete to a pleasant, mannerly companion. (91)

As a married, domesticated woman, Didrikson was finally seen as "pleasant" to be around. References were also made to the sexual relationship between Didrikson and her husband. In "Babe is a Lady Now: The World's Most Amazing Athlete Has Learned to Wear Nylons and Cook for Her Huge Husband," a subheading halfway through the article simply states "The bed is 8 feet square" (Farmer 90). Didrikson herself also made

a point of emphasizing this aspect of her relationship with her husband. At a cocktail party in Los Angeles, an editor asked her “Tell me, Mrs. Zaharias, of all the records you’ve broken and all the events you’ve won, what was the single most thrilling experience of your life?” Immediately, Didrikson responded, “The first night I slept with George” (qtd. in Johnson and Williamson 163). All of her medals, championships, and world-record accomplishments, as far as Didrikson and her public were concerned, did not equal the experience of heterosexual intimacy with a husband.

In 1947, several years into her new identity, Pete Martin covered Babe Didrikson’s win in the British women’s amateur golf championship (Didrikson went back to amateur competition at this point in her career, as there was actually more money and more opportunity for women to play competitively as an amateur than as a professional at that time). In this article, Didrikson again encourages the writer to present her as a different Babe Didrikson than the tomboy who competed in the 1932 Olympics. In fact, she even asks Martin to avoid using her well-known nickname, Babe, and instead refer to her as Marvelous Mildred. She may have done this not only to continue her transformation to a different identity, but also maybe to distance herself from the rumor that she earned that nickname as a young girl when she could hit baseballs as powerfully as Babe Ruth – a manly endeavor. Martin also insists that this interview is “the first accurate word portrait of the greatest woman athlete in history,” which seeks to nullify every other story about Didrikson that might have presented her as someone other than “Marvelous Mildred,” happy housewife (Martin 26). Martin begins his article by admitting that early on in Didrikson’s career, physical descriptions of her were “exaggerated, [making] a number of people think that she was really a boy, masquerading

in girl's clothing.” But Martin insists that, now, Didrikson is “a different person. The years [have] mellowed the Babe” (27). To prove her physical transformation, Martin describes her appearance in great detail:

Babe is no longer button-breasted. The bust measurement of this ex-Texas girl, “born halfway between masculine flats and angles and the rubbery curves of femininity” – which was the way a sportswriter described her in the 1930's – is now a Valkyrian forty inches. The bust measurement of Jane Russell, Hollywood's leading sweater-filler, is only thirty-eight and one half inches. Mildred Zaharias' waist is twenty-seven inches; her hips thirty-seven. She weighs 140. There is little resemblance to the so-called “muscle moll” of yesteryear. Her arms are no more muscular than those of any normally healthy woman... Nor is her manner of dress as Spartan as it once was. Perfume, lipstick and fingernail polish lie on her dressing table. Style and class hang in her closets... Such frills and fripperies are a far cry from the cotton union suits she once wore, and the makeup she definitely *didn't* wear. (27)

Pete Martin explains Didrikson's transformation not as a radical change, but as the “real” Babe Didrikson finally breaking through. He noted that “When [he] helped with her 1936 magazine article [he] noticed that in the midst of a discussion of her Olympic triumphs she kept bringing the conversation back to the prize she had won for designing a dress in a high-school competition. She seemed prouder of that prize than of all her world's records” (135). As he believes, “Marriage woke the Babe's latent passion for domesticity... she made her own floral chintz curtains, complete with pleated valances,

her own cream lamp shades with green ruffles, planted her own rose garden. The Babe does all her own housework” (136). Her domestic interests were always there, he implies; it is just that now, finally, they have “woken up.” Even the title of Pete Martin’s article, “Babe Didrikson Takes Off Her Mask,” indicates that her prior appearance, behavior, and attitude toward the male gender was all just a façade that can be quickly cast away to reveal her true self waiting underneath. As Susan Cahn explains, titles like this one imply “an illegitimate representation of masculinity soon shed for a truer, more rewarding feminine persona” (Cahn, Coming 217). And when female athletes shed this masculine persona for a more feminine, domesticated, and heterosexual one, the public often responds with relief.

Even as Babe Didrikson’s marriage appeared to grow weaker, more fraught with conflict, and more distant, she and her husband continued to insist publicly that they were as close as ever. Friends and family have suggested in later biographies that George Zaharias experienced “increasing periods of wanderlust” (Cayleff). As for Didrikson, she became very close friends with Betty Dodd, an up-and-coming professional golfer, who actually lived with the couple for the last six years of Didrikson’s life. As Susan Cayleff recounts, “They were constant travel companions on the tour, music-making buddies, and a persistent source of infuriation and friction to George who had quite literally been replaced in Babe’s affections” (Cayleff). While some suspect that their relationship may have been a sexual one, the true nature of their bond has never been proven. This detail does not really matter, however. The important idea here is that even in an increasingly unhappy marriage, Didrikson remained with her husband and remained quiet about just how close she was with Betty Dodd. As long as Didrikson was married to George

Zaharias, she could avert all of the presumptions and insinuations about her sexuality and about her femininity as a whole that she had previously experienced. No one questioned her, as long as she was a married woman. She avoided mentioning Dodd until the last few pages of her 1955 autobiography, *This Life I've Led*, probably because, even up until the end of her life, she was concerned about presenting an acceptable image of herself to the American public. As Cayleff points out, "That she worked so hard in her death-bed autobiography to portray her life as harmonious, non-conflictual and ideally bonded to husband and sports peers, speaks to her savvy desire to construct a culturally-acceptable life story" (Cayleff). It was this "culturally-acceptable" life story that took away all of the accusations and innuendos she suffered early in her career, and it is this same life story, perhaps, that made her one of the most well-known and successful female athletes of this century. If she had stayed that brash, boyish, "sissy-hating," rough-sport-playing woman that she was in the early 1930's, she ran the risk of alienating the public that made her career possible.

The importance placed on identifying well-known female athletes as heterosexual did not end with Babe Didrikson. Even current female sports figures are identified as heterosexual through subtle mentions of boyfriends, husbands or kids. One article about Danica Patrick's – "the 23-year-old brunette with the model looks" – recent success, for example, ended with this final image of her experience at the Indy 500: "At the end of the day, Patrick left the infield holding hands with her fiancé, Paul Hospenthal, 39, a physical therapist she met while seeking treatment for a hip injury from a yoga session. The couple will reportedly marry on Nov. 19" (Silverman). Later, a brief article was published in the *Detroit Free Press* about Patrick that contained one large photo. In the

photo, Patrick was decked out in her racing gear, kissing her new husband. The article asks if Danica Patrick is “just auto racing’s version of Anna Kournikova, a driver who has yet to win a race but gets way more attention and marketing deals than she deserves because she’s an attractive young woman.” The answer? “While Kournikova’s mostly about sex appeal, Patrick’s people said hers is more across-the-board (plus she’s married and admits it)” (“Danica”). Indeed, part of Patrick’s success comes from the fact that her heterosexuality and femininity are affirmed through pictures and articles devoted more to her marriage than her career.

Sometimes instead of explicitly mentioning husbands or children, the media simply show that they exist by publishing pictures of them. For instance, the *People* magazine article about the U.S. women’s World Cup victory featured a total of fourteen photographs. Five of those showed the women’s “slumber party”-like celebration, six showed team members with husbands and children at home, and the final three were action shots taken during the game. However, the choice of two of the action shots deserves some consideration. Out of those action shots, one was of their coach (a male) shouting directions from the sidelines, and one showed an injured player being helped off the field by her coach. Therefore, in addition to emphasizing their familial relationships through photographs to reduce the threat of homosexuality, the photographs also support other traditions of femininity. The “little girl” quality of the players can be seen in several of the celebration photographs. The two action shots imply a strong male figure in charge, influential enough to be featured, and a woman requiring the assistance of a man to walk because her body was too delicate to take the strain.



It seems as though the only time wives or fiancées are mentioned in the context of male sports figures is when their wives are famous, such as Andre Agassi's ex-wife Brooke Shields, or when there is a scandal of some kind, such as Kobe Bryant's relationship with his wife after rape allegations were made public. This is partly due to the fact that while it seems that many female athletes are assumed to be lesbians, the sexual preferences of male athletes are rarely questioned; they are believed to be heterosexual, unless something significant occurs that causes people to question it.

*Dangers of the Closet: The Vilification of Lesbians or Suspected Lesbians in Female Professional Sport*

When a female professional athlete does not provide evidence of husbands, boyfriends, or other male companions, she is often assumed to be a lesbian. Rumors circulate until her sexuality is proven, one way or another. Two famous professional tennis players, Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova, experienced such public suspicion and ridicule for years until they finally admitted to being lesbians. However, coming out of the closet simply opened the door to a new kind of problem.

Billie Jean King, an outspoken feminist and pioneer in the world of women's professional tennis, was a popular champion despite the "waves" she often made when she pushed for equality in men's and women's tennis. A twenty-time Wimbledon champion by the end of her career, King was perhaps best known for her "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match against self-proclaimed chauvinist Bobby Riggs in 1973. Amid the

circus-like fanfare and stereotypical images, King proved that women could be the equals of, or even better than, men on the playing field when she beat him in three straight sets. However, even though King made a legitimate name for herself in the public eye and always had plenty of endorsement deals, her career was almost ruined by the truth about her sexuality.

Billie Jean King had avoided much of the homosexual suspicion many athletes face during the course of her professional career because she was married to a man named Larry King in 1965, just as she was beginning her tennis career, and remained married until 1985. Three years after her wedding, King began to realize that she was more attracted to women. Just like Babe Didrikson, however, King was shielded from any questions from the public about her sexuality; her marriage acted as a protective barrier from the press. At one point in her career, King began having an affair with a woman named Marilyn Barnett, which lasted for a few years during the 1970's. In 1981, King faced the biggest challenge of her life when Barnett filed a palimony suit against her, and she was forced to confront her affair publicly. During a press conference, King admitted the affair, but called it a "mistake" and told reporters she planned to remain married to her husband. Though she was still insisting that she was not a lesbian at that time, Billie Jean King felt the repercussions of lesbianism in the world of female professional sports. As Mary Jo Festle summarizes in her book, *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports*:

Negotiations for a Wimbledon clothing line deal worth \$500,000, which had virtually been finalized, fell through after news came out. She also lost endorsements with a Charleston hosiery company, a Japanese clothing

company, and a blue jeans contract worth \$300,000. Her business managers estimate that over the next three years she lost at least \$1,500,000... In fact, a year later, she was the only major player in the world without a clothing endorsement contract. (239)

It wasn't only Billie Jean King that was affected negatively by the news, either. Her husband and all of the tennis organizations she helped create also lost considerable money when sponsors dropped out. It was made painfully clear that sponsors would have nothing to do with suspected homosexuals in the athletic world. On the other hand, Tracy Austin, a player of the same time period who had been injured for quite some time and so could not play any tennis matches, continued collecting all of her substantial sponsorship checks. Why? She had a boyfriend (Stabiner 156). Sponsors will support the heterosexual female athlete who can't play a sport before they will support the homosexual number one athlete in her sport.

Billie Jean King retired from professional tennis two years later, and divorced her husband in 1985. However, King did not willingly come out as a lesbian until 1998, seventeen years after she was forced into the spotlight. Luckily for Billie Jean King, her "outing" took place towards the end of her tennis career. If this had happened to her earlier, the chances that she would have been able to continue such a brilliant athletic career would have been severely lessened. Since her retirement, she has been able to support herself financially and emotionally without difficulty, as she was still a very important figure in the world of tennis, and now in the LGBT community.

Shortly after Billie Jean King was publicly "outed" in 1981, an article was published in *The New York Post* that also outed long-time suspected lesbian Martina

Navratilova. Although rumors of Navratilova's sexuality had been circulating for quite a few years before this and she had never gone to great pains to hide it, this was the first public confirmation of her homosexual relationships. As Mary Jo Festle explained, "She had applied for U.S. citizenship and feared her relationships with women could be used against her. Naively, she admitted these fears to a reporter but asked him not to print them. He waited a few months, until Navratilova had been granted citizenship, then published a story in which she explicitly admitted the sexual relationship with [best-selling lesbian novelist Rita Mae] Brown" (Festle 240).

Professional female athletes who admit to being lesbians, while no longer having to fear the insinuations and the accusations, face a new challenge. After her Wimbledon win in 1990, Martina Navratilova was accused of being a poor role model for young girls by a former tennis cohort, Margaret Court ("Navratilova" 2C). What had Navratilova done to earn this condemnation? She hugged her partner, Judy Nelson, in celebration of her victory in front of the crowd. Acknowledging homosexuality is enough for a female athlete to be labeled immoral, simply because she does not conform to society's expectations of the ideal woman.

Perhaps even worse than this is what happened to Navratilova shortly after the *New York Post* article was published in 1981. Suddenly, Navratilova was portrayed as even more manly than usual. Also, now, in addition to being manly, she became inhuman. One reporter, Frank Deford, called her "the tip of some scientific fiction iceberg" (Deford, "High Gear" 29). In addition, in an article titled "The Smartina Show, or Tennis in a Lethal Vein" written about two years after her "outing," author Barry McDermott describes Navratilova's success in the Virginia Slims tournament as "simply

too good.” He describes “Team Navratilova,” a group of experts that molds the tennis great into an unbeatable opponent. The descriptions of Navratilova’s training regimen and team versus sweet Chris Evert Lloyd’s dependence on only her husband for support bring to mind the training sequence in the film *Rocky IV*. Chris Evert is Rocky, America’s pride and joy, while Martina Navratilova appears to be Ivan Drago, the inhuman, machine-like Russian (or in this case, Czechoslovakian) who has all of science and technology at her disposal to allow her to abuse her opponents. Continuing the image of Navratilova as machinery, one of the members of “Team Navratilova” is Renee Richards, described as “the engineer behind Navratilova’s on-court mechanics.” McDermott also goes on to depict Navratilova as “eager to sweat forever” as she “bludgeon[s]” and “teas[es]” her opponents on the court. Pitted against Evert, the player described by another reporter as “never seeming to sweat,” it is interesting to note the dichotomy created between the married, attractive athlete, and the athlete described by another reporter as “the bleached blond Czech bisexual defector” (Deford, “A Pair” 80). Right before Evert was due to meet Navratilova on the court, McDermott claims that “The look in Evert Lloyd’s eyes seemed to say, ‘If I don’t make it back, tell Mom and Dad I love them’” (McDermott 34). Navratilova is portrayed in this article as something inhuman, frightening, and unnatural, instead of simply an athlete who worked very hard and trained regularly to become the top player in her sport.

Whereas before the confirmation of her homosexuality she was described as simply unfeminine or “mannish,” after 1981, Navratilova seemed to be portrayed more and more often in news articles as some kind of genetic anomaly. One of her opponents, after losing a match to her in 1984, suggested that she “must have a chromosomal screw

loose somewhere” (“The Best of All Time?” 61). Even though it was around this same time that Martina Navratilova made a concerted effort to feminize her image, just as Babe Didrikson did before her, by “visit[ing] a fashion consultant and chang[ing] the style and color of her hair (to blonde), beg[inning] to wear some makeup, and tr[ying] to make sure photographers took pictures only when she was looking good,” she still remained unapologetic about her sexuality (Festle 242). Her feminization, therefore, was not enough. During one U.S. Open match against Chris Evert, after the news about her sexuality became public, “a female voice shouted, ‘Come on, Chris, I want a real woman to win’” (qtd. in Festle 241). Even though she was trying to look the part, Navratilova’s powerful athleticism and confirmed lesbian relationships made her less than “a real woman.”

One final difference between the two rivals – Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova – could be seen when Navratilova finally retired after her very successful tennis career in 1995. Six years earlier, when Chris Evert retired, Curry Kirkpatrick’s ten page article detailing Evert’s plans for marriage and children to take the place of tennis in her life was published in *Sports Illustrated*. Evert’s picture was placed on the cover of the issue above the caption “I’m Going To Be A Full-time Wife.” When Martina Navratilova announced her retirement in 1995, minus the promise for upcoming heterosexual relationships and children, not only did *Sports Illustrated* not place her picture on their cover, but they also did not even run an article within their pages. Although she is considered by many to be one of the greatest female tennis players of all time, not a word was published in this magazine that previously dedicated ten pages and a cover to her frequent opponent. While one cannot necessarily say for sure why this happened, it does

make one think about the potential ramifications of confirmed homosexuality in the world of women's professional sports.

## **Conclusion: Have Female Athletes Truly “Come a Long Way, Baby”?**

In 1967, Anne Gillespie Lewis was one of only three female sportswriters in the entire country, and she considered herself lucky. During one assignment, Lewis recalls, she felt the condescension of the males on staff more than usual:

The year after Peggy Fleming won the gold medal, she came to town with the Ice Follies. They sent me out to skate with her and interview her. They wanted a picture of the two of us, but they wanted me to fall. In Minnesota, everyone can skate, and we don't fall. I said I'm not going to do that. I'm not Peggy Fleming, but I can skate and I don't fall. They made me fall because it was cute and made more of a story. (Salter 129)

It isn't just professional athletes who feel the pressure to appear vulnerable and small when it comes to sports. In this country, women are socialized, albeit often subtly, from a very early age that it is unbecoming, even unnatural, to excel in physical activities, and they must temper their talents with assurances of femininity, or even weakness, in order to not raise any eyebrows. As Billie Jean King stated:

Women are always nervous about being aggressive. Parents don't even realize this. And it's not done on purpose. But girls are taught to be passive from the pink blanket to when she falls down, to how they are held, how they are talked to, how they are told they are pretty. If a boy falls down, the father says, "Get up, you're okay." If a girl falls down, they say, "Oh, are you all right?" She's being told to be passive. If a woman is aggressive, people say she's a bitch, they don't like it. But



women and men need to be appropriately aggressive. And we're not.

(Salter 17)

Perhaps it is not only athletics in which women have to be careful to tone down their aggressiveness in order to gain approval. As Mariah Burton Nelson asks, "How many of us achieve but only in a lesser, smaller, feminine way, a manner consciously or unconsciously designed to be as non-threatening as possible?" ("I Won. I'm Sorry"). Unfortunately, the research of this thesis did not extend beyond the professional sports world. One interesting area that could be studied further might be to look into how the "feminine apologetic" might also affect women outside of athletics; for example, how it might also appear in the working world. Do professional businesswomen, politicians, construction workers, etc. also feel the need to temper their ambitions in a traditionally masculine sphere with an ultra-feminine appearance and demeanor? Many female executives featured in *Fortune Magazine's* annual feature, "25 Most Powerful People in Business" are pictured at home with their husbands and children, whereas their male counterparts are seen at work, in full suits. They are asked how they juggle family life with their responsibilities in their company, while the men are not. Hillary Clinton famously "softened" her public image, even down to her new pink suit, during her husband's presidency in order to deter more attacks on her apparently ruthless and overly ambitious nature. Could these women be experiencing the same pressure to assure the public of their femininity, maternal instincts, and heterosexuality as they venture into a realm that is still considered by many to be a masculine one?

Another issue that could be explored with more thorough research is the difference in experiences between Caucasian women and minority women. For example,

many researchers suggest that African American women did not experience the same expectations of femininity in early professional athletics that white women did. African American males may have been more accepting of their wives and daughters displaying physical strength and stamina early on in professional sports because of cultural differences. Therefore, the things that held white women back from participation might have given African American women greater chances to participate and succeed. There was also a stigma attached to certain sports. For example, track and field was considered less feminine, whereas tennis, a country club sport, was deemed more acceptable for white women. This may explain why more African American women participated in certain sports, such as track and field and basketball, and white women were encouraged to participate in sports that were considered less strenuous and more ladylike, such as tennis, golf, and swimming. Do these divisions still exist in some form today? Are African American women now expected to be just as ladylike as their Caucasian counterparts, or are there different expectations of femininity? Is there still a propensity for women of different ethnicities to choose certain sports over others? If so, why? This would be an interesting topic for further study.

Although women's sports have grown significantly in popularity and acceptance throughout the years, it is evident that females still have a long way to go before they are truly on an "equal playing field." Women participating in traditionally masculine endeavors still seem to bring out the old fears: will she lose her femininity, becoming "mannish" in her physical appearance and demeanor? Will she lose interest in other traditionally feminine roles, such as those of wife and mother, leading to a drastic change in societal roles? Will she "turn into" a lesbian, often seen as perhaps the most dangerous

consequence of all? Since women first began participating in competitive sports, they have had to confront such public fears directly, whether they wanted to or not.

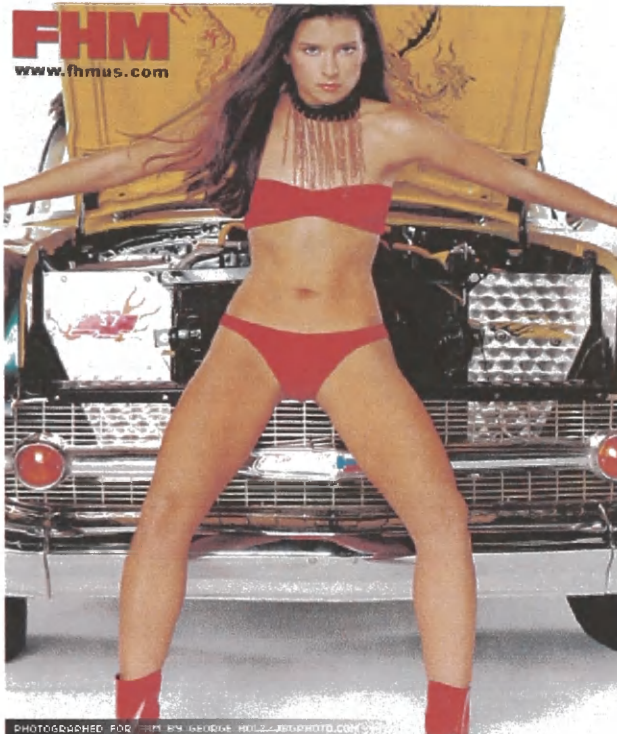
Professional athletes soon learn of the pressures they're up against, and oftentimes, the most successful female athletes seem to be the ones who have learned how to play the femininity game just as well as, if not better than, their own sport. As Mariah Burton Nelson writes in her article "I Won. I'm Sorry":

So if you want to be a winner and you're female, you'll feel pressured to play by special, female rules. Like men, you'll have to be smart and industrious, but in addition you'll have to be "like women": kind, nurturing, accommodating, nonthreatening, placating, pretty, and small. You'll have to smile. And not act angry. And wear skirts. Nail polish and makeup help, too. (Nelson)

By constantly feeling the need to reassure the public about a woman's ability to play sports and remain a "true woman," the athlete's accomplishments and talents are constantly undermined. The deeply rooted fear of mannish appearances, behaviors, and demeanors, combined with the concerns about homosexuality among the athletes, are not allowing today's sportswomen to rise to their full potential. If they are concerned with always appearing beautiful and feminine, or pixie-like and cute, they may hesitate before they do things like slide into home base and mess up their uniform. If they feel like they always have to balance their love for their sport with a purported love for cooking or housework, they may hesitate to love their sport so deeply. If they feel like they have to constantly defend their sexual preferences, they may hesitate to be in the public eye. And if the portrayal of female athletes continues to revolve around constant attempts to affirm

their femininity and heterosexuality, little girls may hesitate before they say they want to be like Danica Patrick when they grow up.

## Appendix



**Figures 1-3. Race car driver Danica Patrick, posing in the April 2003 issue of *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*).**





**Figure 4.** Anna Kournikova posing in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, February 10, 2004.



**Figure 5.** The Rockford Peaches of the AAGPBL await instructions from their coach, Eddie Stumpf. The short-skirted uniforms and required use of lipstick helped the players maintain a feminine appearance.



**Figure 6. Los Angeles' Lisa Leslie posing for the WNBA's 2003 promotional ad campaign "This is Who I Am." This photo was taken by Jennifer Pottheiser.**



**Figure 7. Sacramento's Ticha Penicheiro posing for the WNBA's 2003 promotional ad campaign "This is Who I Am." This photo was taken by Nathaniel S. Butler.**



**Figure 8. Phoenix's Lisa Harrison posing for the WNBA's 2003 promotional ad campaign "This is Who I Am." This photo was taken by Nathaniel S. Butler.**





**Figure 9.** Martina Navratilova has been described as a “bionic sci-fi creature” and a “monstrous Amazon.” Early in her career, she hid her arms and shoulders from the public eye because she was embarrassed by their masculine appearance.



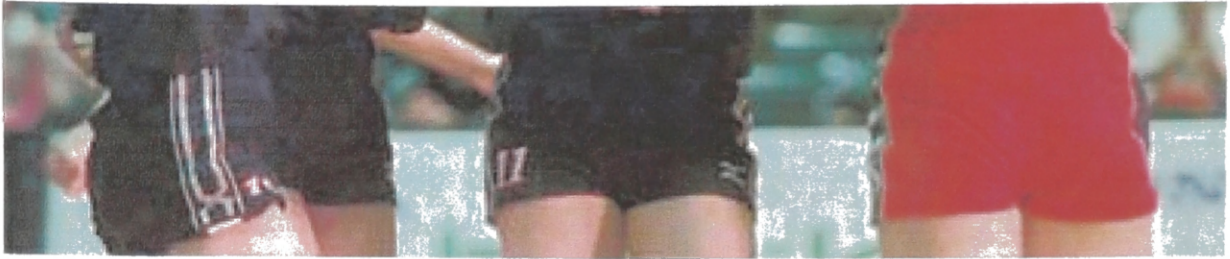
Kristian Bogner

**Figure 10.** Catriona Le May Doan carrying the Canadian flag into the 2002 Olympic Winter Games opening ceremonies. Le May Doan’s sponsors avoid including her legs in photographs because people think “they are scary.”



**Figures 11-12.** Tonya Harding’s “mannish” habits and muscular physique hurt her career long before the attack on Nancy Kerrigan. After the attack, Kerrigan’s place as America’s sweetheart was solidified until she “fell from her princess palace” with her unladylike behaviors.





**Figure 13. These shorts were the official uniform of the International Beach Volleyball Federation (FIVB) prior to the 2000 Olympics.**



**Figure 14. The new uniform of the FIVB, instituted shortly before the Olympic Games, proved to be very uncomfortable for many of the players, impeding their ability to play their sport successfully.**



Figures 15-17. Photos from the Summer 2003 *Dime* Magazine article on Sue Bird called "Sueperfly." Instead of wearing her own jersey in these seductive photos, she instead dons an Allen Iverson jersey.





**Figure 18.** Jan Stephenson's famous 1986 calendar photo, where she posed nude in a tub full of golf balls.



**Figure 19.** The sports bra-revealing moment that put Brandi Chastain on the map.



**Figures 20-21.** Brandi Chastain on the October 1999 cover of *Gear Magazine*. After she took off her jersey following her game-winning goal at the 1999 World Cup championship games, Chastain was offered many opportunities to pose nude for magazines, many of which she accepted. In these photos, Chastain dons nothing more than cleats and strategically placed soccer balls.

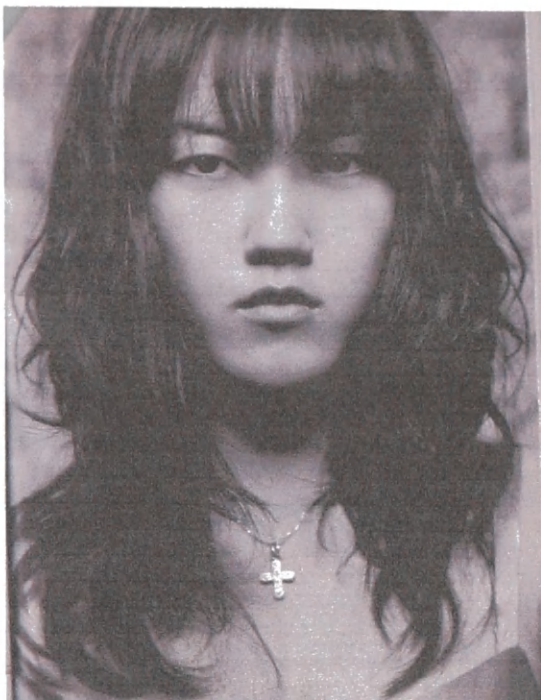


Figure 22. In this advertisement for Secret deodorant, Danica Patrick is portrayed as a “girly girl” with a “soft touch.”



Figure 23. Cathy Rigby in the August 21, 1972 issue of *Sports Illustrated*. While the cover photo of the article is heavily sexualized, Rigby is portrayed as having a little girl innocence throughout the article. The title of the article immediately brings this connection to the surface with its mention of “Sugar and Spice.”





**Figures 24-26.** Michelle Wie is described in this 2005 *Fortune* magazine article as being “on the verge” of womanhood. Because of this, she is pictured alternately as both sexpot and little girl.



Figure 27. Tara Lipinski in her “fairy-tale blue-and-yellow frock” in the 1998 Olympic Games.



Figure 28. The cover of the August 28, 1989, issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Chris Evert’s retirement is explained with the caption “I’m Going To Be A Full-time Wife.” In this article, Evert celebrates giving up tennis for more traditionally feminine roles.





**Figure 29. Babe Didrikson, sometimes described as one of the greatest female athletes of all time, was often criticized for her masculine appearance and attitude.**



**Figure 30. Didrikson actively changed her image shortly before her marriage to George Zaharias. She grew her hair long, began wearing makeup and skirts, and switched to playing golf, a more “feminine” sport.**

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